

2024-25 NBA PREVIEW

AthlonSports

BASKETBALL

ON THE



JJ
TAKES
L.A.

LAKERS RISK IT
WITH REDICK

SPACE
JAM

WEMBY'S
ALIEN
INVASION

YOU'RE READING THE MAG...



Now Rock the Gear!

GET YOUR ATHLON SPORTS APPAREL AT

SHOP.ATHLONSPORTS.COM



EDITORIAL

ROB DOSTER*

MANAGING EDITOR

MATT TALIAFERRO*

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

LUKE EASTERLING

SENIOR EDITOR

STEVEN LASSAN

SENIOR EDITOR

MARK ROSS*

ASSISTANT EDITOR



CORPORATE

PAUL EDMONDSON

GM, SPORTS, THE ARENA GROUP

THOMAS NEUMANN

EDITOR IN CHIEF, ATHLON SPORTS

a360

A360MEDIA, LLC

270 SYLVAN AVE., 3RD FLOOR,
ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS, NJ 07632

(800) 749 - 7733

ERIC SZEGDA

EVP, CONSUMER REVENUE

AMANDA DAMERON

CHIEF CONTENT OFFICER

ANDY WILSON

CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICER

JAMES HEIDENRY

VP, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

HOLLY OAKES

TOM MALONEY

VP, CONSUMER MARKETING

BRIAN THEVENY

KERRY BERLET

SENIOR DIRECTOR,
CONSUMER MARKETING

MELANIE PISELLI

DIRECTOR, CONSUMER MARKETING

BILL FIAKOS

CIRCULATION MANAGER

JACQUI LAMORTE

VP, PUBLISHING
SERVICES & PRODUCTION

PUBLISHED BY A360 MEDIA.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION
IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PRIOR
PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER IS
PROHIBITED. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

*CONSULTANTS

EDITOR'S NOTE

Now, where were we?

Longtime readers of Athlon Sports products will recall that once upon a time, Athlon produced an NBA preview annual. But when the most recent NBA lockout delayed the start of the 2011-12 season until Christmas, one casualty — in addition to some squandered fan goodwill and about \$400 million in lost revenue for franchises and players — was the Athlon NBA preview magazine.

Since then, the league and the sport itself have seen some remarkable developments. The 3-point shot has achieved ascendancy as the game's driving force, giving rise to positionless basketball based on perimeter shooting from guards, wings and bigs alike and rendering traditional back-to-the-basket post players a vanishing breed. A Golden State Warriors dynasty based on 3-point precision has come and gone.

Europe and Africa have become NBA talent factories; the last six NBA MVP award recipients — Giannis Antetokounmpo (twice), Nikola Jokić (three times) and Joel Embiid — hail from across the Atlantic, and Luka Dončić and Domantas Sabonis are among those waiting in the wings for their turn.

A few things remain unchanged since we last published this annual. LeBron James was the face of the league, although he was ringless and had just taken his talents to South Beach in search of championship glory. LeBron has since won four titles — two in Miami, one in Cleveland and one in Los Angeles — and at this point in his career has evolved into the game's elder statesman, but his status as the game's pre-eminent global superstar is largely unchanged.

Back then, the Boston Celtics were in the midst of a five-year run of Atlantic Division titles and had won the franchise's 17th NBA championship in 2007-08. Flash forward to today, and the Celtics are in the midst of a similar run — three straight Atlantic titles and an 18th banner to be hung.

But enough history. A new season approaches, and we're proud to preview the storylines and teams that will grab this year's headlines.

The names may change, but the NBA remains a star-driven enterprise, and no star burns brighter than that of the Alien himself, Victor Wembanyama. Wemby's second season promises more otherworldly exploits, and as you'll read in our feature story "Alien Invasion," his teammates can't wait to see what he does next.

One other thing hasn't changed since 2010 — once again, we've assembled our own all-star cast of writers for this Athlon NBA revival. Loyal Athlon readers will recognize names like Marc Stein and Sam Amico, while other luminaries such as Broderick Turner and Jeffrey McDonald have joined the fold. We appreciate their efforts and know that you will, too.

Enjoy the magazine, and enjoy the season.

Rob Doster

Rob Doster, Managing Editor



FOLLOW ATHLON SPORTS ON YOUTUBE



FACIAL

Pistons guard Jaden Ivey posterizes Rockets center Alperen Şengün on Jan. 12, 2024.

Photo by David Reginek-USA TODAY Sports





103

TIMEOUTS: 3
FOULS: 2
9 4th
4:34

PTS 44
REB 36
ASTS 19
BLKS 4
STLS 6

100

9
FOULS: 2
TIMEOUTS: 3

103
9 4:34



100

PLAYER	PTS	REB	AST	PF
HOUSTON	12	3	10	4
DETROIT	19	10	14	4
LAKE JR.	3	4	1	0
HOUSTON	25	4	1	0

JAN. 17 DET

HOU WEDNESDAY

PISTONS WINNERS



S T E N T E N T H C O O



6 **HOOPS MADNESS**
A look back at the season that was.

14 **NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED**
The Lakers roll the dice on JJ Redick.

18 **ALIEN INVASION**
Victor Wembanyama is not of this world.

22 **THINGS TO WATCH**
The 15 key storylines of 2024-25.

26 **2024-25 NBA PREDICTIONS**
The Celtics are the favorites, but the Thunder (and others) will have their say.

152 **NBA FANTASY PREVIEW**



VISIT THE
ATHLON SPORTS
STORE TO GET YOUR
GEAR



FROM TOP: KIRBY LEE-USA TODAY SPORTS; SCOTT WACHTER-USA TODAY SPORTS

EASTERN CONFERENCE PREVIEW 28

ATLANTIC

BOSTON CELTICS 30
BROOKLYN NETS..... 34
NEW YORK KNICKS.....38
PHILADELPHIA 76ERS 42
TORONTO RAPTORS..... 46

CENTRAL

CHICAGO BULLS..... 50
CLEVELAND CAVALIERS..... 54
DETROIT PISTONS 58
INDIANA PACERS 62
MILWAUKEE BUCKS..... 66

SOUTHEAST

ATLANTA HAWKS..... 70
CHARLOTTE HORNETS 74
MIAMI HEAT 78
ORLANDO MAGIC..... 82
WASHINGTON WIZARDS..... 86

WESTERN CONFERENCE PREVIEW 90

SOUTHWEST

DALLAS MAVERICKS.....92
HOUSTON ROCKETS..... 96
MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES 100
NEW ORLEANS PELICANS.....104
SAN ANTONIO SPURS.....108

NORTHWEST

DENVER NUGGETS.....112
MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES 116
OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER.....120
PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS..... 124
UTAH JAZZ..... 128

PACIFIC

GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS 132
LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS.....136
LOS ANGELES LAKERS 140
PHOENIX SUNS.....144
SACRAMENTO KINGS 148



Contributing Writers: Sam Amico, Jason Beede, Joe Cowley, Neil Dalal, Dustin Dopirak, Wade Evanson, Jonathan Feigen, Jace Frederick, Wes Goldberg, Drew Hill, John Karalis, Joel Lorenzi, Jonathan Macri, Jeff McDonald, Mark Medina, Jannelle Moore, Steph Noh, Sloan Piva, Keith Pompey, Rich Rovito, Erik Slater, Marc Stein, Bill Trocchi, Broderick Turner

Cover Photography: Brunson: Brad Penner-USA TODAY Sports; Curry: Bob DeChiara-USA TODAY Sports; James: Petre Thomas-USA TODAY Sports; Tatum: Trevor Ruszkowski-USA TODAY Sports; Victor Wembanyama: Rob Gray-USA TODAY Sports

FOLLOW
ATHLON
SPORTS
ON YOUTUBE,
YOUR DIGITAL
DESTINATION
FOR ALL
THINGS SPORTS

NEW VIDEOS EVERY DAY!

Athlon Sports

@Athlon_Sports

Welcome to the official YouTube channel of AthlonSports.com, your digital destination for... more

athlonsports.com and 4 more links

Subscribed

Home Videos **Sports** Playlists

Latest Popular Oldest

Drafting a rookie as your fantasy football quarterback... The dilemma Yankee fans may have to face this off... The Stanford Tree is easily one of the strangest mascots... Watch out for those Oregon Ducks... The 2023 Las Vegas Aces were UNSTOPPABLE... Yankees Fans Pick the Hottest MLB Player...



HOOPS MADNESS

BY MARC STEIN

THAT 70s SHOW

Coming into last season, NBA players managed to score 70 points or more in a regular-season game just 13 times combined — with six of those performances delivered by Wilt Chamberlain.

Then in January 2024: Philadelphia's **Joel Embiid** and Dallas' **Luka Dončić** both summoned their Inner Wilt, erupting for 70 and 73 points, respectively, just four days apart.

It was the NBA's second straight season with at least two 70-point games; Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell and then-Portland Trail Blazer Damian Lillard both posted 71-point efforts in 2022-23.

Before this recent spree, there had been only two 70-point performances in the 21st century: Phoenix's Devin Booker went for 70 in March 2017 and was preceded by Kobe Bryant's 81-point masterpiece for the Los Angeles Lakers against Toronto on Jan. 22, 2006.

“

I wanna go at REGGIE [MILLER] a little bit. He talked about how he's never seen a guy like [VICTOR] WEMBANYAMA. Yes you have: His name is BOL BOL.

”

Shaquille O'Neal, appearing on TNT's "Inside The NBA," uncorked one of the most unforgettable that-didn't-age-well takes in the history of the beloved show by trying to assert early last season that Suns reserve big man Bol Bol was a legit predecessor to Spurs rookie sensation Victor Wembanyama. Two nights later in Phoenix, with Bol never leaving the Suns' bench as a DNP-CD, Wembanyama erupted for 38 points and 10 rebounds, powering San Antonio to a surprise win on the road and quickly establishing himself as the Rookie of the Year favorite.

FROM LEFT: BRAD PENNER-USA TODAY SPORTS; SAM SHARPE-USA TODAY SPORTS

SCARY STUFF

It obviously didn't work out in Brooklyn when **James Harden** tried to tell the world upon his trade to the Nets on Jan. 14, 2021, that the trio he was forming with Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving would result in nothing but "scary hours" for the opposition.

It must be said, however, that no one in the NBA does Halloween quite like Harden.

For starters, think about what he pulled off last Oct. 31. After unexpectedly exercising his \$35.6 million player option for 2023-24 and seemingly forfeiting all control of the situation, demanding a trade with only one destination on his wish list, inviting widespread criticism for his supposed lack of self-awareness and leverage at age 34, publicly blasting 76ers general manager Daryl Morey as a "liar," skipping media day and appearing in zero exhibition games for Philadelphia, Harden still got the trade to Clipperland that he wanted all along when the Sixers and the Clippers came to terms on a blockbuster deal in the heart of pumpkin season — which is not when you typically see blockbuster deals on the NBA calendar.

Harden, mind you, apparently never got that memo, because he had pulled off something similar about a decade earlier. In October 2012, fresh off winning Sixth Man of the Year honors and making a trip to the NBA Finals, Harden forced a trade to a Morey team after contract negotiations broke down with the Oklahoma City Thunder. On Oct. 31, 2012, Harden sealed a new five-year, \$80 million contract with the Houston Rockets and promptly shredded the Detroit Pistons in his Rockets debut later that same day with 37 points, 12 assists, six rebounds and four steals.

Halloween 2024 figures to be much quieter for Harden after he and the Clippers just came to terms this summer on a two-year, \$70 million extension — but now you won't be surprised if the Beard makes headlines again this Oct. 31.





BANNER YEAR

The Los Angeles Lakers really had no choice after winning the NBA's inaugural in-season tournament last December.

It would have been a slap in the face to the league office if the franchise had done nothing to commemorate the first IST title in league history. So the Lakers compromised and reluctantly hung a banner in the Crypto.com Arena rafters — albeit a different color banner (black with gold accents and with space left to add other years to 2023 if they win it again) than the team's trademark gold banners hung for each of the Lakers' 17 championships.

The Lakers were bound to be criticized no matter what they did — banner or no banner — and they duly absorbed plenty of heat for the decision. It's a franchise, remember, that has maintained a banners-are-only-for-championships policy for ages, refusing to hang them for Western Conference championships or Pacific Division titles.

The more worrisome situation in Lakerland, of course, is how the in-season tournament title they won last season was such a rare burst of success for the purple and gold over the past decade-plus. **LeBron James** and **Anthony Davis** both appeared

in 70-plus games last season, but the Olympian duo couldn't prevent the Lakers from finishing outside the West's top six for the 11th time in 12 seasons.

We repeat: The Lakers of Los Angeles have finished higher than seventh in the Western Conference just once in the past 12 seasons.

The only exception in that span, of course, was the Walt Disney World bubble season in Orlando in 2019-20, when James and Davis combined to lead the Lakers to a championship in their first season together after the coronavirus pandemic halted the season for four months.

“

**They all got plenty to say.
That I don't have what it takes.
That I'm not it. That I can't lead.
CAN'T CLOSE. CAN'T WIN IT ALL.
Well maybe they'll stop talking now.
THEN AGAIN, MAYBE
IT'S BEST THEY DON'T.**

Boston's **Jayson Tatum**, speaking in a new Jordan Brand commercial that aired in June moments after the Celtics completed a five-game dismantling of the Dallas Mavericks in the NBA Finals.

”

FANTASTIC FREE- THROWING

Next time one of your buddies tries to tell you that modern NBA players just don't do the fundamentals as well as they did in the good old days, we've got the perfect reply for you.

Did You Know: NBA free-throw shooting has never been better — we repeat: NEVER — than it has been in the last two seasons.

NBA players shot a composite 78.4 percent from the line last season. In 2022-23, that figure was 78.2 percent.

That figure had never been higher than 77.8 percent (2020-21) league-wide in any of the NBA's first 76 seasons — and only six of those previous 76 seasons featured a composite success rate from the stripe as high as 77 percent.



HOOPS MADNESS

CRAZY BUSINESS

Monty Williams said no to the Detroit Pistons multiple times before finally accepting a monstrous six-year offer worth nearly \$80 million to coach them.

It will go down as one of the truly remarkable coaching contracts in league history, for three very significant reasons:

1. Williams' megadeal reset the entire market for NBA coaches. San Antonio's Gregg Popovich would have landed his own megadeal anyway, no matter whom Detroit would have hired in summer 2023, but the fact remains that Popovich is on a long list of coaches — alongside Miami's Erik Spoelstra, Golden State's Steve Kerr, Dallas' Jason Kidd, the Los Angeles Clippers' Tyronn Lue, Sacramento's Mike Brown and New York's Tom Thibodeau — to land very lucrative contract extensions in the wake of Williams' windfall.

2. The Pistons started the 2023-24 campaign 2-1 and then lost 28 consecutive games from Oct. 28 to Dec. 28, establishing a new single-season NBA record.

3. Williams was ultimately fired by the Pistons on June 18, after holding onto the job for more than two months after his disastrous debut season. Signed to a landscape-changing contract that promised a salary in the \$13 million range annually through 2028-29, Williams wound up winning all of 14 games before leaving Motown.

P.S.: New Phoenix Suns owner Mat Ishbia also fired Frank Vogel after just one season as Williams' replacement in the desert. By hiring Mike Budenholzer to replace Vogel on a five-year deal reportedly valued in the \$50 million range, Ishbia will be paying out roughly \$16 million to his head coaches this season.



ANOTHER PARTY FAVOR

One more pressing question sure to invite a slew of opinions next time you want to spark some spirited debate among NBA-loving friends: Ask them if the Boston Celtics will be the first team to repeat as NBA champions since the Golden State Warriors in 2016-17 and 2017-18.

The Celtics are bringing pretty much their whole title team back, so they should have a decent shot at it, but remember: We're on the brink of never-before-seen parity for the NBA.

There have been six different champions across the past six NBA seasons, matching a run of variety last witnessed from 1974-75 through 1979-80.

There has never been a stretch in NBA history with seven different champions across a span of seven seasons.

If you had to call it now: Are you backing the Celtics? Or taking the field?



“

**It was the
HAPPIEST DAY
OF MY LIFE
with the BABY, but
then today's game
was a BIG ROLLER
COASTER, too.**

Dallas' **Luka Dončić**, speaking after the first game he played following the birth of his daughter Gabriela, which saw the Mavericks score 30 consecutive points in the fourth quarter and still lose at home, 126-120, to the Oklahoma City Thunder on Dec. 2, 2023. The 30-0 run was the largest in the league since 1997-98 — as far back as the Elias Sports Bureau said it could research the matter.

”

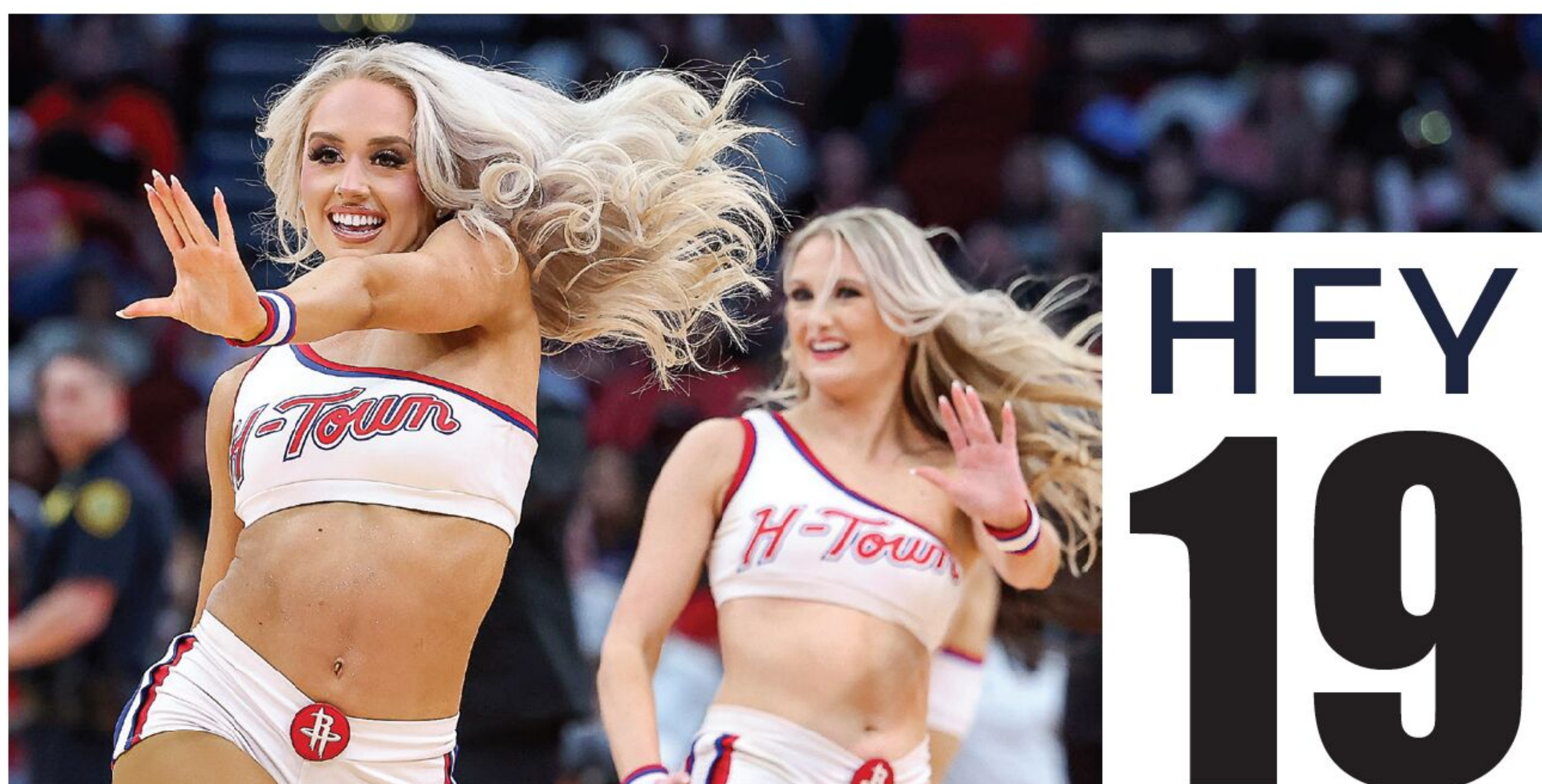
FROM TOP: JESSE JOHNSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; ELSA/POOL PHOTO-USA TODAY SPORTS

at the buzzer

The Dallas Mavericks have quietly expressed confidence that **Kyrie Irving** will be ready for training camp after the team announced in July, without warning, that Irving sustained a broken left hand during an off-season workout that required surgery to repair.

The start of camp was indeed still two months away when the Mavericks made the announcement, but no one in Dallas dared to dismiss the injury as something that happened to Irving's non-shooting hand. Not after Irving's remarkable running southpaw fling at the buzzer against the Denver Nuggets in March — somewhere between a hook shot and a push shot — went down as one of the shots of the season.

Of any season, really.



We're dating ourselves in a major way by expecting you to remember that that's the name of a famed Steely Dan song from 1980. But it very nearly became a very pertinent NBA saying last season.

The Houston Rockets went 13-2 in March under fiery first-year head coach Ime Udoka despite playing much of the month without the injured Alperen Şengün. The second-half surge enabled the Rockets to finish at 41-41.

However ...

Had Houston won one more measly game, last season would have been the first season in league history to feature 19 teams with winning records. Nineteen out of 30!

Instead?

The Rockets became just the fifth team in league history, since the NBA went to a 16-team playoff format in 1983-84, to miss the playoffs after assembling a double-digit winning streak. From March 8 to March 29, Houston won 11 in a row.

ON THE REBOUND

American-born players have some catching up to do on the boards, too. But they did rebound last season from an embarrassing showing two seasons ago.

In 2022-23, there was only one American-born player among the NBA's top 10 rebounders: New York's Julius Randle at No. 9.

In 2023-24, by contrast, we saw two U.S.-born players in the top five: The Los Angeles Lakers' **Anthony Davis** at No. 3 and Detroit's **Jalen Duren** at No. 5.

Sacramento's Domantas Sabonis has topped the league in rebounds per game for two seasons running. The last American-born player to lead the league in rebounds per game was Andre Drummond, then playing for Detroit, in 2019-20.



MARCH MADNESS

The NBA redefined March Madness last season. What do we mean?

Well ...

There is no record book to consult on this one, but we're not exactly going out on a limb by proclaiming that March 2024 featured two examples of defensive shot-contesting that broke new ground.



example no. 1

With Boston playing Phoenix and the Suns' Royce O'Neale about to hoist a 3-point attempt after his team called a timeout, Celtics head coach **Joe Mazzulla** came out on the floor to try to block the shot, explaining later that he didn't want a struggling O'Neale to find any rhythm. Mazzulla got a scolding from the league office and was told to never do it again.

example no. 2



The Clippers' **James Harden** made it a full-on contesting craze just a few days later when he passed the ball to a wide-open **Kawhi Leonard** in the corner but then made the bizarre decision to run at Leonard hard and defend his own teammate's shot. The Clippers were routing Portland at the time, and Leonard indeed missed; Harden claimed afterward that he only tried to guard another Clipper to lighten the mood after a difficult recent stretch for the team in a game they were already well on their way to winning.

"Gotta bring some excitement to this team," Harden said. "I think these last few weeks [have] been a fog for us. I think every team goes through it. I think me just trying to create a good energy, create a great vibe for this team. It would have been better if he made the shot. Give us something to laugh about, some excitement."

“Gotta bring some
EXCITEMENT
to this team.”

GAME TIME

A fun question to liven up the debate at your next office party or gathering with fellow hoopheads: Will we ever see another American-born player win the NBA's regular-season Most Valuable Player award?

Can you name the last to do so? You have to go all the way back to James Harden in his Houston days in 2017-18.

Denver's **Nikola Jokić** (three), Milwaukee's **Giannis Antetokounmpo** (two) and Philadelphia's **Joel Embiid** have won the last six MVPs. And Dallas' Luka Dončić and Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, from Slovenia and Canada, respectively, appear to be closer to an MVP breakthrough than Minnesota's Anthony Edwards or Boston's Jayson Tatum.

Don't forget, furthermore, that San Antonio's Victor Wembanyama (France) is yet another foreign-born star bound to be crashing this conversation sooner rather than later.



“
So this is
MY STORY.
And I've really
EMBRACED IT.

”



Two-time reigning NBA slam dunk champion **Mac McClung** has won those two dunk crowns despite appearing in just four NBA games in his career — and none last season. The 25-year-old guard, listed at 6-foot-2, was initially hesitant to participate in the dunk contest again in Indianapolis after winning the contest as a player on a two-way contract with the Philadelphia 76ers in a stirring performance at All-Star Weekend in 2023 in Salt Lake City.

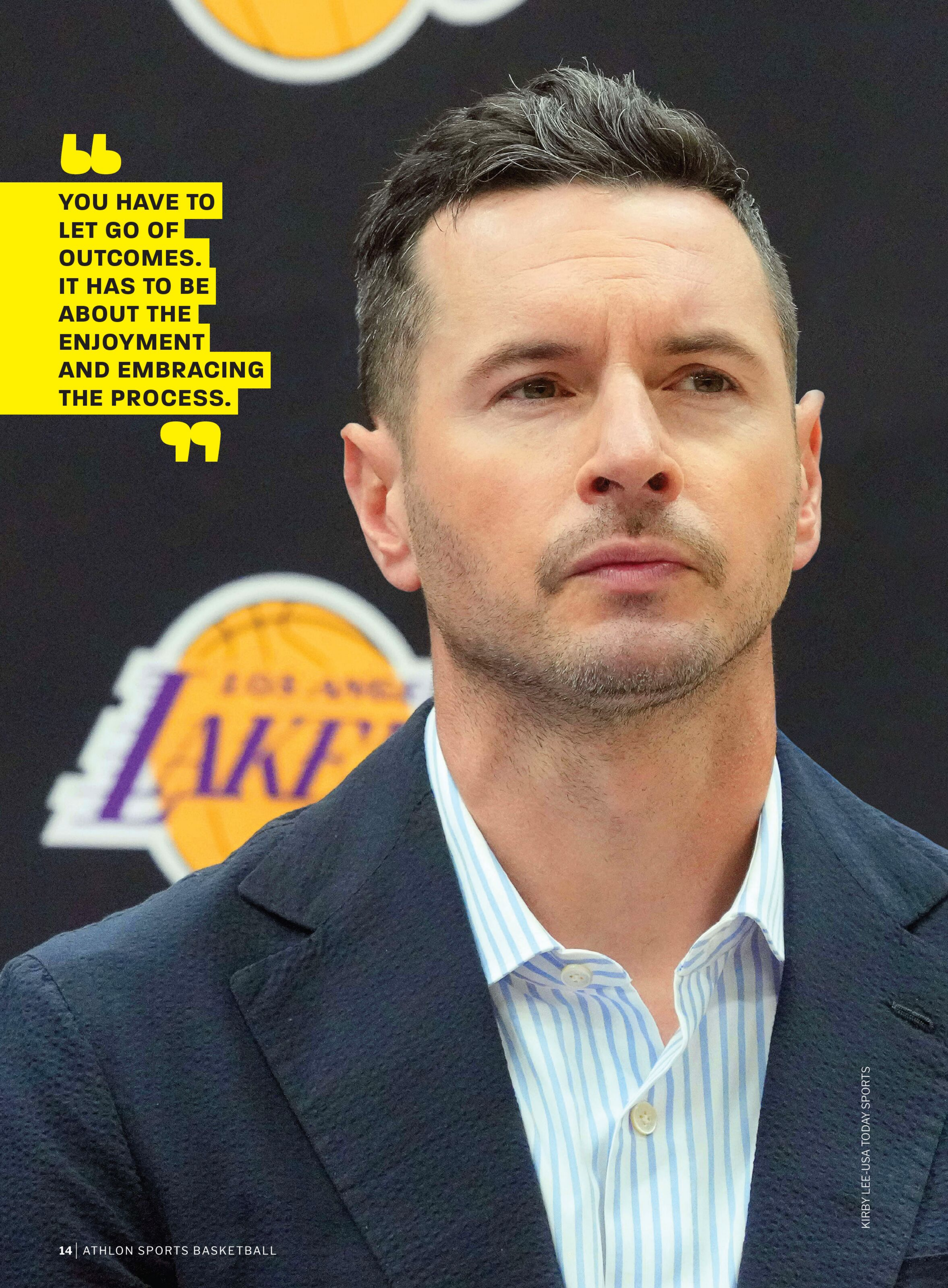
But McClung ultimately relented, accepted the NBA's invitation to defend his crown and won it again. He also wound up winning MVP honors in the G League last season for his play with the Osceola (Fla.) Magic but proved unable to secure so much as a 10-day contract in the NBA.



“

**YOU HAVE TO
LET GO OF
OUTCOMES.
IT HAS TO BE
ABOUT THE
ENJOYMENT
AND EMBRACING
THE PROCESS.**

”



KIRBY LEE-USA TODAY SPORTS

NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED

NEWLY MINTED LAKERS HEAD COACH

JJ REDICK

LACKS A COACHING RÉSUMÉ,
BUT HE DOESN'T LACK CONFIDENCE
OR VISION

BY BRODERICK TURNER

They often sat next to each other watching the Los Angeles Lakers play in the Las Vegas Summer League in July, and it was during those moments when general manager Rob Pelinka would hear from his new head coach, JJ Redick, about Redick's contention that today's NBA players consume basketball knowledge and develop their basketball IQ in different ways than their predecessors.

As Pelinka began to lean into the newness of Redick's approach, those conversations reiterated to him that his views and Redick's were aligned.

It became apparent to Pelinka that even a sage like LeBron James and a student of the game such as Anthony Davis could appreciate Redick's methods. The young players like D'Angelo Russell, Austin Reaves and Rui Hachimura could learn from Redick's teachings. Up-and-coming players like Max Christie, Maxwell Lewis and rookies Dalton Knecht and Bronny James could develop under Redick's tutelage.

Maybe it was a roll of the dice to hire Redick, who has never been an NBA coach, but Pelinka saw the rewards as being worth the risk. Sitting next to the former ESPN analyst and podcaster only convinced him it was the right decision.

"The biggest investment now is going to be internal, and it's going to be growing what you have and player development," Pelinka says. "And I think JJ saw that three years ago and started to lean into it, and now we get to reap the benefits of what that means."

Those benefits became apparent during the Summer League.

Redick was a prolific shooter over his 15-year NBA career, connecting on 41.5 percent of his 3-pointers, doing much of his work running off pin-downs and screens, always moving to get free.

When he watched Knecht during one Summer League game, Redick quickly pointed out to Pelinka ways to improve the first-year shooting guard's development and how new technology could help in that regard.

"I guess in sitting with JJ at all the Summer League games, you really get an insight into his mind and the details of the game," Pelinka says. "He'll be talking throughout the game, and a player will make a move, like Dalton Knecht, and he'll say, 'He needs to get his hips lower coming off this ball screen so that he's ready to spring into his shot.' Now, I'm going to grab one of our film guys. I'm going to get five clips of plays that do it right."

"I'm going to format this in a way that it reaches him, almost like he's clicking on Instagram and it pops on his feed, because then he can digest it as opposed to just a lecture. So, I really think JJ is onto something, and it's fascinating to sit with him and talk about it."

As a player, Redick was known for his intellectual approach to the game. His coaching strategy will be along those same lines. Redick will especially make that the case when it comes to developing his young players.

"Yeah, I think just in general, the player development program we're trying to build is holistic," Redick says. "I think oftentimes when people

talk about player development, they talk about ball-handling and shooting and passing, and certainly the mechanics of playing basketball are an important part of player development. But it's also tactical. It's about reads. It's about incorporating film, incorporating analytics."

Redick has a vision of how it can all work. He wants the individual who fills the newly created position of director of player development to produce a program that carries out that vision.

"It's nutrition. It's how you take care of your body, your work in the weight room," he says. "There's also, I think, a big part of player development, and it's for someone who has lived in this league a long time, a big part of this is, is the mental development. And all the ups and downs that come. I had a chance to spend a few minutes with Dalton, and one of the things we talked about is just being open-minded. Having an openness and just letting go of outcomes. ... And that's a great starting point if you want to develop into a great NBA player."

To be sure, the fundamentals of the game remain the same for Redick. It's still about shooting. It's still about passing. It's still about rebounding and playing defense and being a willing and good teammate.

And for the Lakers under Redick, it's still about putting the right players around James and Davis, the two cornerstones.

"Yeah, look, I think you have to surround your best players with shooting in today's NBA," Redick says. "Spacing is at a premium. And as a coach, there are a lot of plays that you don't have control of. ... So, it's important that you also have players that have a good feel for the game and can read and react. We want to implement more structure, and with structure, you certainly need a high basketball IQ. But at times when there isn't structure, and you don't have control, you also just have to have a feel for the game."

Redick retired from the NBA after the 2020-21 season, having played with six NBA teams.

But he stepped into the media space before leaving the game, becom-



Lakers GM Rob Pelinka (far left) and new head coach JJ Redick (far right) will allow their rookies — Dalton Knecht and Bronny James — time to develop while Redick looks to Bronny's dad, LeBron, to ease his transition to coaching.

ing the first active NBA player to launch a weekly podcast. He joined ESPN after retirement and became one of the network's top analysts.

At no time did Redick coach professionally before he was hired by the Lakers. He coached his son's youth basketball team. So, there's that.

Redick took the naysaying in stride. "I have never coached in the NBA before," Redick told reporters, laughing. "I don't know if you guys have ever heard that."

His hire by the Lakers sent shockwaves throughout the league. Why hire someone with no experience? Why put a newbie like Redick in the top seat during James' twilight years?

And why would Redick want to coach when he has enjoyed so much success on TV and with his podcast?

"My motivations for doing this? It starts with a very simple foundation of service," Redick says. "I think the greatest moments, especially towards the end of my career, were about helping players. And so it starts with the desire to serve players, to serve the Lakers organization, to serve our fans. It's also about competition and performance, collaboration, leadership. These are the things that drive me."

"When I think about the NBA today, the game is evolving, and it's evolving fast. And one of the things in coaching that I think you have to be is adaptable. You have to be adaptable to

your roster. You have to be adaptable in game-planning against your opponent. And that's one of the things I really will strive to be.

"Lastly, I just want to say, I know what the expectations are. Lakers fans have some of the most passionate fans around the world. And the expectation is a championship. And so it's my job, it's our staff's job, it's Rob's job, it's all of us, to deliver a championship-caliber team. That's what I signed up for."

When the Lakers began their search for a new coach, Redick's name was prominent. Then the Lakers changed course, offering the position to University of Connecticut coach Dan Hurley. But Hurley turned down their six-year, \$70 million offer and returned to the program he led to back-to-back NCAA championships.

The Lakers pivoted back to Redick.

"I was keeping him abreast of the search," Pelinka says. "And I think sometimes before a partnership is forged, when you can have real honest conversations before you actually become partners, it solidifies the relationship. And I think looking back to how transparent we were with one another, even in the midst of stuff going on in the media, I think it actually solidified."

Redick says his ego wasn't bruised. He understood the process.

Redick and Pelinka had met and

talked at the NBA Draft Combine in Chicago and had kept an open dialogue. Eventually, Redick signed a deal that will pay him \$8 million per year over four years.

"We had a great conversation during that whole four-day period," Redick says. "At no point was my ego or feelings hurt or bruised in any way. Dan Hurley is a two-time national champion at UConn. I am a two-time 55 Swiss League champion in the third- and fourth-grade division. Like, I understood, you know?"

There have been plenty of former NBA players who have stepped into the head-coaching ranks without any

MY MOTIVATIONS FOR DOING THIS? IT STARTS WITH A VERY SIMPLE FOUNDATION OF SERVICE. I THINK THE GREATEST MOMENTS, ESPECIALLY TOWARDS THE END OF MY CAREER, WERE ABOUT HELPING PLAYERS.

prior experience. The key to success, most agree, is the quality of the staff, and their suggestion to Redick was to hire experienced assistant coaches.

Golden State's Steve Kerr recalls his first practice as head coach of the Warriors and how disastrous it was. But he had former NBA head coach Alvin Gentry and guru assistant Ron Adams to help him through the process.

"It was a little bit of a s—show, to be honest. I had these plans with the coaching staff beforehand, but it was like the first day of school, only I was a brand new teacher," Kerr says. "You have to get through the bumps in the road and iron things out. But I remember the first two days were a little chaotic.

"I was lucky I had Ron Adams and

Alvin Gentry with me. Although I shouldn't call it luck. I purposely hired them because I knew I would need their expertise. And they were great. They were fantastic and helped me through that transition process."

By the way, Kerr won an NBA championship in 2015, his first season.

Doc Rivers also had never coached in the league before he took a job with the Orlando Magic in 1999. He's now with the Milwaukee Bucks, his fifth team.

"You can't be scared of staffing," Rivers says. "Like, you have to try to name your staff. I had two ex-head coaches on my [Magic] staff. Dave Wohl and Johnny Davis had both been ex-head coaches, and I thought that was very important for me. They knew what you can do and what you can't do. I won Coach of the Year my first year."

Derek Fisher went from playing with the Oklahoma City Thunder to coaching the New York Knicks having never coached in the NBA before. He had spent 18 years in the league and had won five championships with the Lakers.

"JJ has been out of the game for a few years and had an opportunity to be around guys in other settings," Fisher says. "Like, he had a podcast with LeBron. That didn't necessarily exist when I was making that transition. But it's a good example of how different that is for even a guy that may not have previous experience coaching. It's really the relationships with players that drive your success to a large degree, anyway. So, if you're in a position where you have that to lean on, it does help cushion the experience part. The collection of individuals on the staff can help offset the lack of coaching experience."

Like those three former players-turned-coaches, Redick did hire two former head coaches, realizing the importance of experience. The seasoned and respected Nate McMillan and Scott Brooks are on Redick's staff.

"I'm excited about JJ," LeBron James says. "I'm excited to work with JJ, also to work with Coach Brooks and Coach McMillan as well. Those are two great pieces as well to add to our coaching staff. But I'm super excited to work with JJ."

So, did James have any role in Redick's hire? After all, the two had fostered a friendship, and their relationship grew as they collaborated on their podcast.

But Redick maintains that during the hiring process, James "didn't provide any advice" and that it was a subject that never came up during those moments talking about basketball on the podcast. Redick says he and James didn't talk about the job until he was hired.

"That was very intentional on our parts," Redick says. "I had an understanding that he did not want to be involved in this. And for me, I didn't want to go down the path of hypotheticals with someone that I consider a friend and someone that I have a great amount of respect for."

Redick finds himself in a lead seat that is perpetually hot. Lakers fans unrealistically believe their team should compete for a championship every season. Redick calls championship expectations "reasonable."

"I don't look at the current roster as being that far off from a championship-caliber team," Redick says. "In terms of managing expectations, I think in life, you just got to embrace things, you know? You just really have to embrace things. You don't run from it. If you need to talk about it, you talk about it. ... I've never played with players in the NBA who were like, 'You know what? This year's not the year. I don't think we can win a championship.'"

"Now, the expectations here are certainly different. And as we sort of build out the culture, one of the things — and Rob and I have talked about this — you have to let go of outcomes. You just do. It has to be about the enjoyment and embracing the process. And if the Los Angeles Lakers on Day 1 get better every single day, I'm very confident that come April, we will be a championship-caliber team."



OLIEO ROOSIO

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA IS NOT OF THIS WORLD

BY JEFF McDONALD

 n a sunny Saturday in May, a handful of San Antonio schoolchildren crowded into the auditorium at the local planetarium to help celebrate the city's newest and biggest star.

It was an inspired choice as the setting for Victor Wembanyama's NBA Rookie of the Year trophy presentation.

"I can't think of a more perfect place for a man who has an alien on his shoe," Spurs general manager Brian Wright said.

With Wembanyama's season-long highlight reel scrolling on the planetarium's domed ceiling — and after he had given the assembled grade-schoolers a lecture on the scientific concept of "dark matter" (yes, really) — the 20-year-old Frenchman gladly accepted the Wilt Chamberlain Trophy, which he had earned in unanimous fashion.

He said he had the perfect place picked out for displaying the first of what surely will be a multitude of NBA awards to come in his career. At home, in the back of a closet.

"I want it to be overshadowed by what I do in the future," Wembanyama said of his Rookie of the Year keepsake. "I don't want it to push me in the slightest to slow down."

To translate that from Wemby-speak: When it comes to the Spurs' young centerpiece, the NBA ain't seen nothing yet.

What Wembanyama might do for an encore during his second tour

through the league sets up to be one of the more riveting storylines as the 2024-25 campaign dawns.

Wembanyama offered a foretaste in August, when he led the French national team to a silver medal at the Paris Olympics. Even in defeat, Wembanyama went toe-to-toe with a star-stacked Team USA roster in the gold-medal game.

"As long as Victor stays healthy, the league is his."

— Giannis Antetokounmpo

"He's like, 'I'm here, I've arrived and there's nothing anybody can do about it,'" Spurs guard Devin Vassell said.

Wembanyama admitted he didn't know what to expect when he alighted in South Texas for the first time last fall.

His initial picture of San Antonio came from what he had seen in old Western films. Wembanyama was immediately struck by the distinct lack of cactus and tumbleweeds, and far fewer cowboy hats per capita than he had envisioned.

"It was not like in the movies," Wembanyama said.

The Spurs, meanwhile, thought they knew what to expect from Wembanyama after making him the No. 1 pick in the 2023 draft. The team had

fared well with No. 1 picks in the past, selecting David Robinson in 1987 and Tim Duncan in 1997.

Individually speaking, Wembanyama's dominant rookie season stacked up solidly with those of both future Hall of Famers.

The 7-foot-4 sensation was the first player in NBA history — rookie or otherwise — to surpass 1,500 points, 700 rebounds, 250 assists, 250 blocks and 100 made 3-pointers in the same season.

Wembanyama was the first rookie in NBA history to total 1,500 points, 250 assists and 250 blocks. Only three other players of any age have hit those thresholds — Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Hakeem Olajuwon and Robinson.

Wembanyama was the 10th player in NBA history to average 20 points, 10 rebounds and three blocks per game. He was the second rookie to lead the league in blocked shots, following Manute Bol (1985-86).

He was the youngest player in league history to record a 20-20 game, the youngest to log a 5x5 game and the youngest to post a 40-20 game.

In addition to sweeping the Rookie of the Year balloting, Wembanyama earned a spot on the NBA's All-Defensive first team, the first rookie to do that since Duncan.

And on and on and on.

"He was able to do so many great things this year just in one season with all the expectations and all the pressure on him," point guard Tre

Jones said. “He was able to do so many crazy things. Every single night he’s doing something new we haven’t seen before.”

The rest of the league took immediate notice.

Wembanyama garnered nightly kudos from a who’s who of NBA greats, drawing awestruck praise from the likes of LeBron James, Kevin Durant, Giannis Antetokounmpo, Stephen Curry and others.

“He’s going to be a force in this league for a long time,” said Durant.

After Chris Paul signed a one-year deal to join the Spurs in July, the 12-time All-Star admitted the obvious: The chance to play alongside Wembanyama was a key drawing card.

“There’s no player in the league that everybody in the league talks about after the game like him,” Paul said.

Spurs head coach Gregg Popovich said what impressed him most from Wembanyama’s rookie season was his night-in, night-out consistency, something that is rare for a first-year player learning the league.

“Every game he rebounds and blocks shots” Popovich said. “He changes shots. He’s a heck of a passer, gets his assists. For a rookie to do that night after night, with the numbers that he’s getting, it’s pretty impressive.”

Wright, the team’s general manager, said he was pleasantly surprised with Wembanyama’s demeanor and work ethic.

“The level of maturity, the level of focus, the level of drive is even beyond what somebody can tell you about it beforehand,” Wright said. “The humility; being a good teammate; how much winning matters to him. I think you see three or four plays every game you’ve never seen before, but I think that other stuff kind of stands out even more.”

It seems the only one not completely dumbstruck by Wembanyama’s sensational rookie season was Wembanyama himself.

Asked if believed he had surpassed expectations in his maiden NBA season, Wembanyama shook his head.

“Maybe it’s the case, but it’s not how I feel,” Wembanyama said. “Every day I try to push harder and to



Wembanyama’s 34-point, 12-rebound performance in April spurred San Antonio past the Nuggets, knocking the defending champions out of a No. 1 seed in the Western Conference playoffs.

do more — more achievements, more records, more wins. But the next day I always tell myself that I didn’t do enough and to push me even more.”

Wembanyama’s only regret after posting a rookie season rivaling any in NBA annals was that his otherworldly exploits came mostly in defeat.

Unlike Robinson and Duncan — whose arrivals heralded an immediate turnaround in the Spurs’ fortunes — Wembanyama spent his rookie campaign fighting uphill against an avalanche of losses.

The Spurs finished his inaugural go-round 22-60, matching the woeful mark from the season before that had landed them Wembanyama in the first place. From Nov. 5 to Dec. 15, the Spurs dropped an astounding 18 games in a row, setting an ignominious club record.

Despite the overabundance of losses, Wembanyama said his confidence in the club’s direction never wavered.

“Never even one second,” Wembanyama said. “I never thought at any point I wasn’t in the best place. I wish we didn’t lose 60 games. But as much as it is hard today, I know it’s (good) for the long term.

“It’s going to look better when we win.”

The Spurs have their next generational superstar in place. The task of building a contender around Wembanyama falls to the front-office decision-makers — Wright, Popovich and club CEO R.C. Buford.

It has been a painstaking process so far.

The team appears to have made at least minor improvements over the offseason, adding a pair of high-quality veterans in Paul and Harrison Barnes.

Though past his prime at age 39, Paul represents an immediate upgrade at point guard. The idea of the NBA’s active career assists leader

throwing lobbs to Wembanyama is tantalizing.

The 32-year-old Barnes, meanwhile, should find his way into the Spurs' starting lineup either as a small forward or smaller power forward.

If nothing else, Paul and Barnes should bring some much-needed veteran experience to a roster that spent much of last season as the youngest in the NBA.

The Spurs are hopeful that the pair can help boost a young core that includes Vassell, Jeremy Sochan, Keldon Johnson, rookie newcomer Stephon Castle and, yes, even the extraterrestrial Wembanyama.

"He's so unique and does so many different things, we're still learning what he's doing," Wright said of Wembanyama. "He's so dynamic that I think we can build the thing in a lot of different ways. I don't know that there's one blueprint."

Though it would be false to suggest Wembanyama eased into his rookie season — he posted 38 points and 10 rebounds in a victory at Phoenix in his fifth career game — it is fair to say he got more comfortable as the campaign wore on.

His Spurs teammates, meanwhile, grew more comfortable with him. Learning to play alongside a player who broke all previous basketball rules of time and space took some getting used to. It even took Popovich a few months to determine how to best deploy Wembanyama.

The rookie opened the season playing power forward, the position he manned most often earlier in his professional career in France. By January, the coaching staff came to the not-to-startling conclusion that the 7-foot-4 guy should play center.

Popovich moved erstwhile starting center Zach Collins to the bench and slid Wembanyama over one spot. Wembanyama's rookie season took off from there.

After the All-Star break, Wembanyama averaged 23.5 points, 12 rebounds, 5.3 assists and an eye-popping 4.5 blocks per game.

"I'm glad we can experience stuff and figure out my role," Wemban-

yama said. "It's also me figuring out how I want to play now but also for the future how we want to build. We're still trying some stuff."

Some of the statistical lines Wembanyama put up in the latter half of his rookie season don't even seem real: 40 points and 20 rebounds in an overtime victory over New York; 27 points, 14 rebounds and 10 blocks in a win at Toronto; 33 points, 18 rebounds and seven blocks in an overtime loss at Philadelphia.

Wembanyama capped his campaign in stellar fashion, going for 34 points and 12 rebounds as the Spurs squeezed out a 121-120 victory over Denver, a game that would ultimately cost the defending-champion Nuggets the No. 1 seed in the Western Conference playoffs.

With that in mind, expect Wembanyama to play center full time in 2024-25, albeit with the ball in his hands most of the time.

"I'm ready to get any role and play



any position and especially with our offense," Wembanyama said. "I might be the 5 on paper, but I'm the 1 30 percent of the time. So the position really doesn't matter."

When it comes to projecting the heights Wembanyama might reach in the seasons to come, no bar feels too high.

"It's going to be scary to see what he's going to look like in the next three or four years, what our team chemistry is going to look like," Vassell said. "We have something good here."

Barring something unforeseen, Wembanyama should find himself at least on the fringes of the Most Valuable Player discussion in fairly short order. An All-Star berth seems like a lock, as does a possible All-NBA nod.

Wembanyama should enter his sophomore campaign as the odds-on favorite to win Defensive Player of the Year honors after finishing as runner-up to countryman Rudy Gobert last season.

If the Spurs are able to improve on their 22-win season and at least compete for a play-in berth, Wembanyama's award hopes will only stand to increase.

Ultra-competitive but uncommonly patient, Wembanyama understands that the full Spurs rebuild won't be completed in a season or two.

"We're not going to build something great by saying we want to win championships or go to the playoffs," Wembanyama said. "It's set a new brick every day, and then we'll build a house."

The rest of the NBA is bracing for Wembanyama's next cosmic step forward. Just ask Antetokounmpo, Milwaukee's two-time NBA MVP. "As long as Victor stays healthy," Antetokounmpo said, "the league is his."

In the meantime, Wembanyama might consider building himself a sturdy trophy case.

How far into the NBA stratosphere can the astronomy-loving Wembanyama one day reach? His Spurs teammate Sandro Mamukelashvili perhaps summed it up best.

"I feel like even the sky's not a limit," Mamukelashvili said. "He's an alien."

15

KEY STORYLINES FOR
THE UPCOMING SEASON

BY SAM AMICO

1 CBA BLUES

The new collective bargaining agreement is something that can go unnoticed by fans, but it is already playing a major role in how teams go about building their rosters. The entire league has been impacted — and general managers and salary-cap gurus are admittedly being thrown for a bit of a loop.

For the non-numbers experts, the modern-day CBA was agreed upon by the league and the players and introduces a “second apron,” which can significantly impact how teams go about roster construction. It used to be that GMs could spend freely, provided that their owners were willing to ante up on tax penalties for going over the cap. Now, though, if you spend over that “second apron,” you’re greatly hindering your ability to make trades, sign free agents or acquire expensive players of any sort.

Everyone, it seems, is feeling the pinch.

“It’s hard because with these aprons there’s so many restrictions on what teams can do,” Cleveland Cavaliers GM Mike Gansey says. “The way the new rules are set it’s just tough. Some of those teams (approaching the second apron) are just so limited.”

All of this is designed to help create parity — though some will tell you that process already has begun. Six different franchises have won titles in the six past seasons. That’s the longest stretch without a repeat champion since the 1970s and ’80s.



Jayson Tatum

2 CELTICS' SECOND ACT

It’s been a long time since a team cruised to a title in the same fashion that the Boston Celtics did last season. They finished 64-18 for a 14-game advantage over the New York Knicks, who finished second in the Eastern Conference standings. That was the largest margin between Nos. 1 and 2 since 1976.

Boston then went 16-3 in the postseason, winning three of their series by a 4-1 count — including the Finals vs. the Dallas Mavericks — and sweeping the Indiana Pacers in the Eastern Conference finals.

That, folks, is complete domination.

But in today’s NBA, repeating as champs seems as tough as ever. No one has done it since the 2017-18 Golden State Warriors, back when they had Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, Klay Thompson and Draymond Green in their primes.

Those are four future Hall of Famers. The Celtics, on the other hand, might just have two in Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown.

Still, that could be enough, especially when you consider the experience and depth of the rest of the roster. The Celtics truly have it all, with perhaps the league’s best defensive backcourt in Jrue Holiday and Derrick White, as well as one long unicorn in 7-foot-2 forward/center Kristaps Porziņģis.

Nor do the Celtics have any worries about the new CBA. They don’t have money to spend, but that’s OK. They don’t really need any. Everyone important is signed and sealed and ready to make another run at the biggest prize.

3 SIXERS SENSE

Believe it or not, Philadelphia has failed to get past the second round of the playoffs in the Joel Embiid era. Ben Simmons, James Harden, whoever — nothing has worked. So now, the 76ers have brought in Paul George and an entire cast of new veterans to help Embiid and emerging star Tyrese Maxey reach new heights.

Along with George, the Sixers landed Caleb Martin from the Miami Heat via free agency, and that right there will be their starting frontcourt — Embiid, George and Martin. It's undoubtedly an upgrade, on paper, over last season.

Along with those names, guards Eric Gordon and Reggie Jackson arrive to help shore up the backcourt bench, with Andre Drummond returning to do the same up front.

Will it work? There's only one way to find out, and that's seeing all that veteran talent take the court. But by all accounts, the Sixers enter the season with sky-high hopes and a roster that has the organization and its fans believing in big things.



Joel Embiid and
Shai Gilgeous-Alexander

4 RISE OF THE THUNDER

Raise your hand if you had the Oklahoma City Thunder finishing with the best record in the Western Conference last season. Don't worry, — we didn't pick them, either.

Instead, most had OKC pegged as a play-in team, using all those first-round picks to keep playing the draft lottery.

They should be right back near the top in 2024-25, with the likes of Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Chet Holmgren leading the way. On top of that, they should be better prepared for the playoffs after acquiring feisty guard Alex Caruso from the Chicago Bulls (for Josh Giddey) and signing center Isaiah Hartenstein, the former Knicks backup who will likely start.

5 KNICKS KICK INTO HIGHER GEAR

For all the talk about Boston and Philadelphia, perhaps nobody improved on paper like the New York Knicks, and they did it with a single steal of a deal, landing borderline All-Star forward Mikal Bridges from the Brooklyn Nets while surrendering five future first-round picks and aging wing Bojan Bogdanović in return. Clearly, New York is in win-big-now mode.

Adding Bridges to Jalen Brunson, OG Anunoby and Julius Randle makes it easy to think New York should be taken more seriously than ever. Oh, and head coach Tom Thibodeau landed a contract extension, too. In other words, the Knicks have all their pieces in place, and when you consider their core, there's every reason to think they are set to contend.

6 LAKER LULL

Aside from hiring rookie head coach JJ Redick and re-signing LeBron James to a new deal, the Los Angeles Lakers' most noteworthy offseason move was drafting LeBron's elder son, Bronny James, with the No. 55 overall pick. That's truly a great story, but it doesn't mean much when the goal is to improve the team.

The truth is, by the middle of August, L.A. remained one of only three teams that had yet to sign any outside free agents. The Celtics were one of the others, but they're coming off a championship. (The Cleveland Cavaliers were the third.) But the Lakers were bounced in the first round of the Western Conference playoffs.

Their lack of movement was an interesting approach, given that their best chance at winning turns 40 years old this season. Meanwhile, much of the Western Conference seemed to get better.

Granted, teams have until February to make a trade, but you have to wonder if the Lakers have the assets to bring in anyone who will make a difference. That makes it fair to wonder if LeBron is on his way to finishing his career as an also-ran. As for this season, there's still plenty of work to be done. The Lakers aren't really anywhere close to contention.



LeBron James



7 NUGGET RECOVERY?

The Denver Nuggets won the championship in 2023 despite being nobody's pick. Last year, they were practically everyone's pick — and they inexplicably blew a 20-point lead in Game 7, at home, against the Minnesota Timberwolves in the Western Conference semifinals.

Now, they enter the season without former starting shooting guard Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, a top defender and timely 3-point shooter who bolted for the Orlando Magic in free agency. His replacement? A past-his-prime Russell Westbrook.

And Westbrook is about it as far as proven players off the Denver bench, unless you count big man Dario Šarić (and most people don't).

Still, Nikola Jokić is here, and that will be enough to keep the Nuggets in serious contention. It helps that Jamal Murray is a magnificent No. 2 option, with forwards Aaron Gordon and Michael Porter Jr. knowing their roles and generally producing.

But on paper, the Nuggets are severely lacking consistency and perhaps some outside shooting in reserve. It haunted them in the playoffs last season, and now, they will be forced to try it again with similar issues. If anyone can do it, though, it's a Jokić-led team.

8 KEEPING PACE IN INDY

The Indiana Pacers rarely do anything splashy, and even when they do, hardly anyone nationally takes notice. But for all the talk about the large-market teams, let us not forget that it was the Pacers who advanced to the Eastern Conference finals.

And the idea is simply to run it back with point guard Tyrese Haliburton, forward Pascal Siakam, center Myles Turner and a whole cast of quality supporting players. As a bonus, the Pacers boast one of the most accomplished head coaches in the NBA in Rick Carlisle, who won a championship with Dallas in 2011.

Translation: There are still a number of reasons to believe in Indy, and if you're looking for a dark horse, this again should be your pick.



Tyrese Haliburton and Klay Thompson

9 KLAY HITS DALLAS

Star guards Luka Dončić and Kyrie Irving were enough to will the Dallas Mavericks to the NBA Finals, with help up front from relative newcomers P.J. Washington and Daniel Gafford, acquired at the trade deadline, and rookie Dereck Lively II.

It just wasn't enough to win a championship. The Mavs' main deficiency in their Finals loss to the Celtics? Someone to take the burden off all those Dončić and Irving drives by consistently knocking down outside shots.

They hope to have addressed that issue by bringing in Golden State Warriors legend Klay Thompson. He's clearly on his last basketball legs, but he can at least still make open jumpers. Thompson, of course, also has been in lots of high-pressure situations. So this could turn out to be a major transaction for the Mavs and the fresh start that Thompson has said he could use.

10 WARRIORS' OFFICIAL RETURN TO EARTH

Stephen Curry is still here. So are Draymond Green and head coach Steve Kerr. But Thompson is gone. So these days, the Warriors will take the court with the likes of newcomers Buddy Hield and Kyle Anderson, as well as promising youngsters such as Brandin Podziemski and Jonathan Kuminga (along with holdover Andrew Wiggins).

So the consensus is, yes, the Warriors should be improved. Then again, that's not saying much, considering they barely made the play-in tournament and then were quickly dispatched by the Sacramento Kings. It was a historic run for a team that reached the Finals six times and won four titles between the 2014-15 and 2021-22 seasons. But make no mistake — it's over.

As long as management is set on surrounding the aging Curry and Green with mostly youth, the Warriors will be exactly what we've seen over the past two seasons. Lots of buzz, but not really going anywhere.

11 BUCKS STOP WHERE?

Giannis Antetokounmpo and Damian Lillard are back in Milwaukee, and that's enough to offer some hope. You can throw Khris Middleton and Brook Lopez in there, too.

That's about it, though, as the Bucks have been bounced in the first round in each of the past two postseasons. To be fair, Antetokounmpo was injured for last year's playoffs, and Lillard wasn't on the team the year before that.

Either way, a similar meltdown likely will lead to more changes next offseason (or perhaps before). Read: Anything less than a deep playoff run will be considered a colossal failure.



Giannis Antetokounmpo and Karl-Anthony Towns

12 TIME TO TALK TIMBERWOLVES

The Minnesota Timberwolves truly have plenty of everything, from impactful size in Karl-Anthony Towns and Rudy Gobert to dynamic scoring and athleticism in Anthony Edwards. Mike Conley is the ultimate set-up man and a consummate professional who holds it all together. So honestly, it's no surprise they were able to upend the Nuggets and reach the Western Conference finals. Could they take it a step or two further this season? You'd better believe it.

13 CHANGING CLIPPERS

Paul George is gone. Kawhi Leonard and James Harden remain. The Los Angeles Clippers are finally getting their own gym. But does anyone really see any reason to believe that things will be much different?

The Clippers replaced George with Derrick Jones Jr., who's coming off a starting role with the Western Conference-champion Mavericks. They also added high-powered point producer Kevin Porter Jr. in a controversial move. Porter was unofficially banished from the NBA after an ugly domestic case and spent last season in Greece. The Clippers weren't the only team to court him, but they were the only ones to offer him a deal.

You know what they say about desperate times, and that's where this team seems to stand today.

14 SUNS, ACT II

The first full year of Kevin Durant, Devin Booker and Bradley Beal fell flat in Phoenix. While all the preseason memes declared the Suns as Finals favorites, they ended up getting swept by Minnesota in the first round of the playoffs. Their biggest issue was ball movement and the lack of a true point guard. They hope to have addressed all that by firing head coach Frank Vogel after just one season, hiring Mike Budenholzer as his replacement and signing playmaker Tyus Jones. Will it matter? Time, as they say, will tell.

15 HELP FOR VICTOR

For all of last season, the Spurs were content to run out Victor and the Wembanyamaires. This year, they decided to get him some veteran help. Not to win anything meaningful, but to at least win a bit more. Help arrives in the form of Chris Paul, who remains heady and steady at the ripe old age of 39, and Harrison Barnes, who comes from the Kings as part of the deal involving DeMar DeRozan and the Bulls. Both Paul and Barnes have NBA Finals experience. San Antonio is hoping to get Wembanyama some of that someday, too. So what better way to learn (and perhaps pick up some sophomore season wins along the way) than to do it with some guys who have been there?



Victor Wembanyama



2024-25

NBA PREDICTIONS

* Playoff Teams

EASTERN CONFERENCE

ATLANTIC

1. Boston*
2. New York*
3. Philadelphia*
4. Toronto
5. Brooklyn

CENTRAL

1. Milwaukee*
2. Cleveland*
3. Indiana*
4. Chicago
5. Detroit

SOUTHEAST

1. Orlando*
2. Miami*
3. Atlanta
4. Charlotte
5. Washington

**EASTERN
CONFERENCE FINALS**
BOSTON OVER
PHILADELPHIA

NBA FINALS
BOSTON OVER
OKLAHOMA CITY



WESTERN CONFERENCE SOUTHWEST

1. Dallas*
2. Memphis*
3. New Orleans*
4. Houston
5. San Antonio

NORTHWEST

1. Oklahoma City*
2. Minnesota*
3. Denver*
4. Utah
5. Portland

PACIFIC

1. Phoenix*
2. Sacramento*
3. L.A. Clippers
4. Golden State
5. L.A. Lakers

**WESTERN
CONFERENCE FINALS**
OKLAHOMA CITY
OVER MINNESOTA

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER
SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER,
OKLAHOMA CITY

COACH OF THE YEAR
JOE MAZZULLA, BOSTON

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR
REED SHEPPARD, HOUSTON

YOU'RE READING THE MAG ...



Now **Rock the Gear!**

GET YOUR ATHLON SPORTS APPAREL AT
SHOP.ATHLONSPORTS.COM



EASTERN CONFERENCE NOTES



CONFERENCE POWER RANKINGS

- 1. **BOSTON** Champs have a solid shot at repeating.
- 2. **NEW YORK** Highest hopes since the Ewing days.
- 3. **PHILADELPHIA** Paul George makes Philly an East contender.
- 4. **MILWAUKEE** Bucks hope to recapture championship touch.
- 5. **ORLANDO** Looking for first playoff series win since 2010.
- 6. **CLEVELAND** The Cavs have a solid core but lack depth.
- 7. **INDIANA** Conference finals run has hopes soaring.
- 8. **MIAMI** Contention will be an uphill climb.
- 9. **TORONTO** A tough nightly out, but not much more.
- 10. **ATLANTA** Trae Young can't do it alone, but he may have to.
- 11. **CHARLOTTE** An all-out youth movement is underway.
- 12. **CHICAGO** Bulls' rut might cost Billy Donovan his job.
- 13. **BROOKLYN** Next summer's draft can't come soon enough.
- 14. **WASHINGTON** Ditto on looking to the '25 draft.
- 15. **DETROIT** Pistons turn the page on last season's disaster.

ALL-EASTERN CONFERENCE PRESEASON TEAM



FIRST TEAM

G. Antetokounmpo	PF/C	Milwaukee
Jalen Brunson	PG	N.Y. Knicks
Joel Embiid	C	Philadelphia
Donovan Mitchell	SG/PG	Cleveland
Jayson Tatum	PF/SF	Boston

SECOND TEAM

Bam Adebayo	C	Miami
Jaylen Brown	SG/SF	Boston
Paul George	SF	Philadelphia
Tyrese Haliburton	PG/SG	Indiana
Tyrese Maxey	PG	Philadelphia

THIRD TEAM

Jarrett Allen	C	Cleveland
Jimmy Butler	SF	Miami
Damian Lillard	PG	Milwaukee
Pascal Siakam	PF	Indiana
Trae Young	PG	Atlanta

ALL-ROOKIE TEAM

Matas Buzelis	SF/PG	Chicago
Bub Carrington	PG/SG	Washington
Ron Holland	SF/PF	Detroit
Zaccharie Risacher	SF	Atlanta
Kel'el Ware	C	Miami

COACHES ON THE RISE

JOE MAZZULLA, BOSTON

Mazzulla is the youngest head coach to win an NBA title since Bill Russell in 1969. Sky's the limit in Boston.

NICK NURSE, PHILADELPHIA

A champion in Toronto, Nurse would love to bring some hardware to Philly as well.

RICK CARLISLE, INDIANA

Carlisle's an established vet who is building something special in Indiana. He's 57 wins short of 1,000.



JOE MAZZULLA

COACHES ON THE HOT SEAT

DOC RIVERS, MILWAUKEE

Doc's abbreviated debut in Milwaukee failed to impress. A deep run would silence the naysayers.

BILLY DONOVAN, CHICAGO

Three missed playoffs in four seasons weren't what the Bulls had in mind when they broke the bank for Billy D.

JAMAH MOSLEY, ORLANDO

Mosley's Magic have trended in the right direction in his three seasons, but he needs to win a playoff series one of these years.



DOC RIVERS

TIME TO SHINE

JALEN JOHNSON, ATLANTA

Johnson emerged as a major contributor in his third season. Next step: superstardom.

JOSH GIDDEY, CHICAGO

The youngest player in NBA history to record a triple-double, Giddey is a major contributor in multiple categories.

IMMANUEL QUICKLEY, TORONTO

Along with Scottie Barnes, Quickley is one of the cornerstone pieces of the Raptors' rebuild.



JALEN JOHNSON

SLIDING BACK

NIKOLA VUCEVIC, CHICAGO

Vucevic enters the twilight of his career as the Bulls enter a rebuild.

TOBIAS HARRIS, DETROIT

Harris was last seen being held scoreless in the Sixers' season-ending playoff loss to the Knicks.

DAMIAN LILLARD, MILWAUKEE

"Dame Time" has to be running short for the 34-year-old Lillard.



NIKOLA VUCEVIC



UNDER-THE-RADAR SIGNINGS

KENTAVIOUS CALDWELL-POPE (MAGIC)

Pope signed for three years and \$66 million, giving the Magic a much-needed 3-point gunner and defensive weapon.

GARY TRENT JR. (BUCKS)

The Bucks somehow convinced Trent to come on a veteran's minimum deal. He is one of the better volume 3-point shooters in the NBA.



GROSSLY OVERPAID

BEN SIMMONS (\$40.3 MILLION, BROOKLYN) Simmons hasn't been able to stay on the floor due to back injuries. When he has played, he's been petrified of getting to the free-throw line.

JORDAN POOLE (\$29.7 MILLION, WASHINGTON) Poole found lightning in a bottle during the Warriors' championship run. Since then, he's shown poor shot selection and terrible defense.



ATLANTIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **1st**

BOS CELTICS

The champs are literally running it back. Because of the new CBA restrictions, the Celtics didn't add a single player to their championship roster outside of draft picks Baylor Scheierman and Anton Watson. Their only losses were Svi Mykhailiuk and Oshae Brissett. That Celtics team you saw last year is essentially the same one you will see this year. It doesn't mean that they're guaranteed the same result, though.

FRONT COURT

The biggest question marks for the Celtics exist on their front line. Kristaps Porziņģis had ankle surgery in late June to repair a rare tendon injury suffered during the NBA Finals. That is going to keep him out for a couple of months with a return, Boston hopes, sometime around the Christmas matchup with Philadelphia.

That puts more pressure on Al Horford, the anticipated starter in Porziņģis' absence. The 38-year-old Horford impressively has defied the ravages of time, but there's a period at the end of everyone's NBA sentence. The Celtics have prolonged Horford's career by limiting his regular-season minutes and sitting him out of back-to-backs, so even if he's tapped as the team's starting center, someone on the roster will have to fill a pretty big gap.

The Celtics will rely on a rotation of Luke Kornet, Neemias Queta, and Xavier Tillman to get through the first few months. Kornet is a good pick-setter who can roll and catch lobbs when teams overreact to Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown getting to the rim. He's a capable defender whose block percentage (5.5 percent) actually matched Rudy Gobert and Myles Turner last season. Kornet is prone to ups and downs, just like any role player, but he's capable of giving Boston good minutes in the right matchups.

Queta is a big bruiser who can be used situationally. He's an old-school type who takes up a lot of space and doesn't spread the floor, so he's not going to be a regular in head coach Joe Mazzulla's offense, but Queta knows how to operate in the wake of Boston's stars.

Tillman is the, ahem, X-factor in the early going. He was traded to Boston a week before the All-Star break and was dealing with knee soreness when he arrived. He will



JAYLEN BROWN

SCOUTING THE CELTICS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Clearly they did the right thing keeping Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown together. I know they had thought about breaking them up for a while. ... The additions of Jrue Holiday and especially Kristaps Porziņģis are really what's put them over the top. Porziņģis is a cheat code. ... Holiday and Derrick White give them the best point-of-attack defenders in the league. ... Joe Mazzulla got the head-coaching job almost by accident but has proven to be the perfect fit for this group. ... They've been to the Finals in two of the past three years, but I'm not quite sure they're dynasty material just yet."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
48-24
DIVISION: 2ND

2020-21
36-36
DIVISION: 4TH

2021-22
51-31
DIVISION: 1ST

2022-23
57-25
DIVISION: 1ST

2023-24
64-18
DIVISION: 1ST

PETER CASEY-USA TODAY SPORTS (2)



JAYSON TATUM



BEYOND THE ARC

Madman Mazzulla Jrue Holiday referred to head coach Joe Mazzulla as “crazy” multiple times throughout the season. Asked why he used that word so often, he said, “Because he’s crazy.” But Mazzulla’s mind and penchant for finding teachable moments in odd places (like the hunting habits of killer whales, for example) helped keep things fresh and interesting for the Celtics. Holiday credits Mazzulla for helping him see defense in a different way. Derrick White has said he’d do anything for Mazzulla. That’s the kind of buy-in they’ll need to make another title run.

Tatum’s maturity Jayson Tatum admitted over the summer that he always wanted to win, but he wanted it to look a certain way. He said getting away from that is what helped him become more of a facilitator during the championship run.

Cash rules Running it back didn’t come cheap. When you add up all the contracts Executive of the Year Brad Stevens has handed out to his top eight players, the Celtics have committed to more than \$1 billion in contracts since acquiring Kristaps Porziņģis in the summer of 2023. If the Celtics do this again next summer, they could go into the 2025-26 season with the most expensive roster in NBA history.





DERRICK WHITE

Jaden Springer will have a chance to join the rotation and add another pit bull of a defender. He needs to be more reliable with his jumper, and he showed some promise in limited summer league action. If he can hit a few 3-pointers, he'll find himself on the floor as Boston tries to manage minutes a little better.

The real questions are actually with Boston's two stars. Both are incredible players who sacrificed, evolved and played some of their best basketball on their way to a championship. But how will they react to that?

Chasing a championship was long, arduous work for Tatum and Brown. And even though both are still in their prime, the expectations and outside noise after each previous postseason failure ramped up the pressure to win. Both have said that it drove them to make the necessary changes to their games last season.

Do they still have that motivation? It's easy to fall into the trappings of success. The short offseason leaves little time to turn the page and focus on the next task. Where does a player turn for motivation when the previous motivation is gone?

The Olympics might have answered that question. Brown's exclusion and Tatum's DNP-CDs could serve to reignite the fire for both players. If they feel the need to prove themselves all over again, then the fire could stay lit.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Porzingis' absence makes things tougher, but the Celtics are still the class of the Eastern Conference. If Porzingis can return without any setbacks and be healthy for a stretch run, the Celtics should find themselves on top of the conference again. It probably won't be by 14 games again, but it's still up to the Philadelphia 76ers, New York Knicks, Milwaukee Bucks and the rest to catch up.

By bringing everyone back, the Celtics start the season a couple of steps ahead. If they can fight the championship hangover and use some summer slights as added motivation, they have a strong chance to repeat.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	New York	7:30
Oct. 24	at Washington	7:00
Oct. 26	at Detroit	7:00
Oct. 28	Milwaukee	7:30
Oct. 30	at Indiana	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Charlotte	6:00
Nov. 2	at Charlotte	6:00
Nov. 4	at Atlanta	7:45
Nov. 6	Golden State	7:30
Nov. 8	Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 10	at Milwaukee	3:30
Nov. 12	Atlanta	7:00
Nov. 13	at Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 16	Toronto	8:00
Nov. 19	Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 22	at Washington	7:00
Nov. 24	Minnesota	3:30
Nov. 25	L.A. Clippers	7:30
Nov. 29	at Chicago	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Cleveland	6:00
Dec. 2	Miami	7:30
Dec. 6	Milwaukee	7:30
Dec. 7	Memphis	8:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	Chicago	7:30
Dec. 21	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 23	at Orlando	7:00
Dec. 25	Philadelphia	5:00
Dec. 27	Indiana	7:30
Dec. 29	Indiana	6:00
Dec. 31	Toronto	3:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at Minnesota	7:30
Jan. 3	at Houston	8:00
Jan. 5	at Oklahoma City	3:30
Jan. 7	at Denver	10:00
Jan. 10	Sacramento	7:30
Jan. 12	New Orleans	6:00
Jan. 15	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 17	Orlando	7:00
Jan. 18	Atlanta	7:00
Jan. 20	at Golden State	5:00
Jan. 22	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 23	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Jan. 25	at Dallas	5:30
Jan. 27	Houston	7:30
Jan. 29	Chicago	7:30
Jan. 31	at New Orleans	8:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at Philadelphia	6:00
Feb. 4	at Cleveland	7:00
Feb. 6	Dallas	7:30
Feb. 8	at New York	8:30
Feb. 10	at Miami	7:30

Feb. 12	San Antonio	7:00
Feb. 20	at Philadelphia	7:00
Feb. 23	New York	1:00
Feb. 25	at Toronto	7:00
Feb. 26	at Detroit	7:00
Feb. 28	Cleveland	7:30

MARCH

March 2	Denver	1:00
March 5	Portland	7:00
March 6	Philadelphia	7:30
March 8	L.A. Lakers	8:30
March 10	Utah	7:30
March 12	Oklahoma City	7:30
March 14	at Miami	7:00
March 15	at Brooklyn	6:00
March 18	Brooklyn	7:30
March 21	at Utah	9:30
March 23	at Portland	6:00
March 24	at Sacramento	10:00
March 26	at Phoenix	10:00
March 29	at San Antonio	8:00
March 31	at Memphis	8:00

APRIL

April 2	Miami	7:30
April 4	Phoenix	7:30
April 6	Washington	6:00
April 8	at New York	7:30
April 9	at Orlando	7:00
April 11	Charlotte	7:30
April 13	Charlotte	1:00

All times Eastern



BKN NETS



DENNIS SCHRÖDER

SCOUTING THE NETS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

“Welcome to Brooklyn, Jordi Fernández. We just traded our best player (Mikal Bridges, to New York). ... Basically they are gutting the roster and intend to tank. I don’t think anyone is safe. That’s a tough way to go into your first coaching job if you’re Fernández. He’ll probably take the blame for what is sure to be a lot of losing. ... I don’t think they’ll really even begin to formulate a plan until after next year’s draft. It sounds like whoever they take (in 2025) will be the player they build around. ... For now, everyone who is on the roster will just be auditioning for a future role with the franchise.”

After a star-studded era featuring Kevin Durant, Kyrie Irving and James Harden — followed by a transitional period headlined by Mikal Bridges — the Brooklyn Nets are finally entering a rebuild. General manager Sean Marks turned the page this offseason by trading Bridges to the New York Knicks for a package featuring five first-round picks and a first-round pick swap. In a simultaneous deal with the Houston Rockets, he regained control of Brooklyn’s 2025 and ’26 first-rounders from the 2021 Harden trade, giving his team a chance to land a top prospect in next June’s loaded draft.

While draft position should be the Nets’ top focus this season, the team has several young prospects whose development will take center stage. Cam Thomas and Nic Claxton headline the list, alongside sophomores Noah Clowney, Jalen Wilson and Dariq Whitehead.

Brooklyn will kickstart the rebuild under newly hired head coach Jordi Fernández, who led Team Canada at the Olympics. He’s built an impressive track record in player development while working as an assistant for the Sacramento Kings, Denver Nuggets and Cleveland Cavaliers.

Given the team’s new timeline, Fernández and his staff should prioritize the development of younger prospects. This has cast uncertainty over the future of veterans Cameron Johnson, Dorian Finney-Smith, Dennis Schröder, Bojan Bogdanović and Ben Simmons.

FRONT COURT

As was the case last season, the Nets have a logjam on the wing. However, this year, it’s clear which players do not fit the team’s timeline. Johnson (28), Finney-Smith (31) and Bogdanović (35) are veterans who are worthy of playing time in a playoff rotation. Despite a disappointing 2023-24 campaign, Johnson has shot 40.7 percent from 3-point range over his past three seasons. Barring an abrupt move, he will likely open the year in the starting lineup. However, he should be enticing to several contenders.

Finney-Smith and Bogdanović are in a similar position, but their contracts could add urgency to get a deal done ahead of the season. The former will make \$14.9 million before a \$15.4 million player option in 2025-26, allowing

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 35-37
DIVISION: 4TH

2020-21
Record: 48-24
DIVISION: 2ND

2021-22
Record: 44-38
DIVISION: 4TH

2022-23
Record: 45-37
DIVISION: 4TH

2023-24
Record: 32-50
DIVISION: 4TH

FROM LEFT: WENDELL CRUZ-USA TODAY SPORTS; BRAD PENNER-USA TODAY SPORTS



CAM THOMAS



BEYOND THE ARC

Friends to foes After the Phoenix Suns selected Mikal Bridges and Cameron Johnson in the first round of back-to-back drafts, the duo earned the nickname “the Twins.” Johnson has never played an NBA season without Bridges by his side. That will change this year, with the pair set to face off in a crosstown rivalry.

Thomas’ take Cam Thomas spent his first three NBA seasons in the shadows of Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving. He stepped into the spotlight last year after earning a rotation role. Following Brooklyn’s abrupt reset this summer, Thomas says he’s ready to embrace a new role in 2024-25: “I’m just being more of a leader. ... I’m really one of the longest-tenured guys on the team, so I have a good say on what goes on around here, and people listen to what I say. I definitely wanna be a good resource for the young guys and just help out as much as I can.”

Fernández’s forecast Jordi Fernández didn’t bother to temper expectations for Nic Claxton after accepting Brooklyn’s head-coaching job. Claxton finished ninth in the Defensive Player of the Year voting in 2022-23, after which he said the midseason trades of Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving unfairly shifted attention away from him. Fernández says he believes Claxton will win the award this season.



him to become an unrestricted free agent next summer. Finney-Smith’s hard-nosed defense and respectable 3-point shooting make him a fit on most contenders. Bogdanović will make \$19 million in the final year of his contract. He offers greater floor-spacing and shot creation than Finney-Smith, but his fit is dependent on scheme and surrounding personnel.

The Nets have several young wings whose development should take priority. Following a promising rookie campaign, Wilson was named Summer League MVP, averaging 21.8 points on 55.0 percent shooting from 3-point range in Las Vegas. He should have a rotation spot on Day 1.

After Whitehead’s rookie season was cut short by shin surgery — his third lower-leg procedure in 18 months — he struggled in summer league. The 19-year-old needs to regain his explosiveness.

Brooklyn also acquired Ziaire Williams from the Memphis Grizzlies. He offers size and defensive versatility on the wing but needs to expand his offensive game. He will become an unrestricted free agent after this season.

After an impressive rookie season and summer league showing, Noah Clowney looks like Brooklyn’s power forward of the future. He’s 6-foot-9 with a 7-foot-3 wingspan, and his rebounding and shot-blocking alongside Nic Claxton will bolster the team’s defense. Clowney’s floor-spacing potential (36.4 percent on 3-pointers last season) should allow him to play alongside a non-shooting center like Claxton, and his development as an outside shooter and ball-handler will be a barometer of his long-term upside.

Claxton returns after signing a four-year, \$97 million contract this offseason. The 25-year-old’s elite perimeter defense is a weapon in Brooklyn’s switch-heavy scheme. However, the Nets have struggled to rebound when Claxton gets pulled away from the rim. Clowney’s size should help quell that concern.

Day’Ron Sharpe returns for his fourth season behind Claxton. Sharpe would have ranked second in the NBA in rebounding percentage last season had he qualified. He also improved as a defender and shot 68.8 percent at the rim.

BACKCOURT

After leading the team in scoring last season with 22.5 points per game, Thomas should be Brooklyn’s top offensive option. He made significant strides as a

5.5

Cam Thomas averaged 5.5 potential assists per game last season. (Potential assists account for passes that led to made or missed shots.) Top guards typically average anywhere between 10 and 18 per game. Thomas’ playmaking development will be a frequent point of discussion this season.



OFFSEASON MOVES

The Nets did not make a selection in this year’s draft. They acquired three players in trades, welcoming Bojan Bogdanović and Shake Milton from the Knicks and Ziaire Williams from the Grizzlies. At 23, Williams presents the most upside on Brooklyn’s new timeline. If Williams makes Brooklyn’s roster, the team’s player development staff will have a full season to work on his outside shot. Killian Hayes is the team’s only free-agent signing of the summer. The French prospect struggled to make an impact during his four seasons with the Detroit Pistons, mainly due to his lack of 3-point shooting.

ROSTER										2023-24 STATISTICS							48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: JORDI FERNÁNDEZ (1st SEASON; CAREER: 0-0)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
24	Cam Thomas	G	6-3	210	10/13/01	LSU	3	66	31.4	.442	.364	.856	3.2	2.9	22.5		5.0	4.4	34.3
44	Bojan Bogdanović	F	6-7	226	4/18/89	Fenerbahce	10	57	25.9	.454	.398	.785	2.7	1.7	15.2		4.9	3.2	28.2
17	Dennis Schröder	G	6-1	175	9/15/93	Braunschweig	11	80	31.1	.435	.375	.836	3.0	6.1	14.0		4.7	9.4	21.7
2	Cameron Johnson	F	6-8	210	3/03/96	North Carolina	5	58	27.6	.446	.391	.789	4.3	2.4	13.4		7.5	4.1	23.3
33	Nic Claxton	C	6-11	215	4/17/99	Georgia	5	71	29.8	.629	.200	.551	9.9	2.1	11.8		16.0	3.3	19.1
28	Dorian Finney-Smith	F	6-7	220	5/04/93	Florida	8	68	28.4	.421	.348	.717	4.7	1.6	8.5		7.9	2.7	14.4
8	Ziaire Williams	F	6-9	185	9/12/01	Stanford	3	51	20.3	.397	.307	.827	3.5	1.5	8.2		8.3	3.5	19.4
9	Trendon Watford	F	6-8	237	11/09/00	LSU	3	63	13.6	.527	.397	.794	3.1	1.3	6.9		10.9	4.5	24.2
	Killian Hayes	G	6-5	195	7/27/01	Ratiopharm Ulm	4	42	24.0	.413	.297	.660	2.9	4.9	6.9		5.7	9.8	13.8
20	Day’Ron Sharpe	C	6-9	265	11/06/01	North Carolina	3	61	15.1	.571	.267	.610	6.4	1.4	6.8		20.3	4.4	21.6
45	Keon Johnson	G	6-5	185	3/10/02	Tennessee	3	5	12.3	.381	.400	.917	1.4	0.6	6.2		5.5	2.3	24.2
10	Ben Simmons	G/F	6-10	240	7/20/96	LSU	6	15	23.9	.581	.000	.400	7.9	5.7	6.1		15.9	11.5	12.3
21	Noah Clowney	F	6-9	210	7/14/04	Alabama	1	23	16.1	.538	.364	.700	3.5	0.8	5.8		10.5	2.3	17.3
22	Jalen Wilson	F	6-6	220	11/04/00	Kansas	1	43	15.5	.425	.324	.826	3.0	1.0	5.0		9.5	3.3	15.5
13	Shake Milton	G/F	6-5	205	9/26/96	SMU	6	48	12.1	.405	.281	.816	1.6	1.3	4.5		6.2	5.0	17.8
0	Dariq Whitehead	F	6-6	220	8/01/04	Duke	1	2	12.0	.200	.000	.500	2.0	1.5	1.5		8.0	6.0	6.0
16	Jaylen Martin	G	6-6	216	1/28/04	Overtime Elite		R — First NBA Season											



NIC CLAXTON

floor-spacer off the ball last season, shooting a career-high 43.6 percent on 2.5 catch-and-shoot 3-pointers per game. He also showed significant development as a passer, averaging 4.0 assists per game over a two-month stretch during the season’s second half. Thomas’ playmaking development will be a main storyline as he steps into a heavier on-ball role for a Nets team severely lacking shot creation.

Schröder likely will begin the season as Brooklyn’s starting point guard alongside Thomas. Although the 31-year-old does not fit Brooklyn’s new timeline, his playmaking (7.1 assists per 36 minutes last season) and secondary shot creation could provide a calming presence for Brooklyn’s young prospects.

After two straight injury-riddled seasons cut short by back surgeries, it’s unclear how Simmons fits into the equation. The 28-year-old is on a \$40 million expiring contract and shouldn’t factor into Brooklyn’s long-term plans. While a buyout feels logical, it’s unclear whether the three-time All-Star would sacrifice a portion of his salary to make it happen.

Trendon Watford, who boasts similar measurables to Simmons, could handle some of the team’s ball-handling responsibilities. At 6-foot-8, Watford offers intriguing versatility on both ends of the floor. If he can continue to expand his shooting range, the LSU product could earn a long-term contract.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Nets have shifted their focus toward laying the foundation for a sustainable, long-term build. The first step will be landing a homegrown, star-caliber prospect. Brooklyn has several young players with promising futures, but none boast the upside of the top names in the 2025 draft. Fernández and his coaching staff will use this season to develop the young pieces on the roster, but the team’s ultimate prize for 2024-25 should come next June.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Atlanta	7:30
Oct. 25	at Orlando	7:00
Oct. 27	Milwaukee	6:00
Oct. 29	Denver	7:30
Oct. 30	at Memphis	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Chicago	7:30
Nov. 3	Detroit	3:30
Nov. 4	Memphis	8:00
Nov. 8	at Boston	7:30
Nov. 9	at Cleveland	7:30
Nov. 11	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 13	Boston	7:30
Nov. 15	at New York	7:30
Nov. 17	at New York	7:00
Nov. 19	Charlotte	7:30
Nov. 22	at Philadelphia	7:00
Nov. 24	at Sacramento	9:00
Nov. 25	at Golden State	10:00
Nov. 27	at Phoenix	9:00
Nov. 29	Orlando	7:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Orlando	3:30
Dec. 2	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 4	Indiana	7:30
Dec. 8	Milwaukee	3:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 21	Utah	7:30
Dec. 23	at Miami	7:30
Dec. 26	at Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 27	San Antonio	7:30
Dec. 29	at Orlando	3:30

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 2	at Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 4	Philadelphia	6:00
Jan. 6	Indiana	7:30
Jan. 8	Detroit	7:30
Jan. 10	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 12	at Utah	8:00
Jan. 14	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 15	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 17	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 19	at Oklahoma City	7:00
Jan. 21	New York	7:30
Jan. 22	Phoenix	7:30
Jan. 25	Miami	6:00
Jan. 27	Sacramento	7:30
Jan. 29	at Charlotte	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 4	Houston	7:30
Feb. 5	Washington	7:30
Feb. 7	Miami	7:30
Feb. 10	Charlotte	7:30
Feb. 12	Philadelphia	7:30
Feb. 20	Cleveland	7:30

Feb. 22	at Philadelphia	7:30
Feb. 24	at Washington	7:00
Feb. 26	Oklahoma City	7:30
Feb. 28	Portland	7:30

MARCH

March 1	at Detroit	7:00
March 4	at San Antonio	8:30
March 6	Golden State	7:30
March 8	at Charlotte	6:00
March 10	L.A. Lakers	7:30
March 11	at Cleveland	7:00
March 13	at Chicago	8:00
March 15	Boston	6:00
March 16	Atlanta	6:00
March 18	at Boston	7:30
March 20	at Indiana	7:00
March 22	at Indiana	5:00
March 24	Dallas	7:30
March 26	Toronto	7:30
March 28	L.A. Clippers	7:30
March 29	at Washington	7:00
March 31	at Dallas	8:30

APRIL

April 3	Minnesota	7:30
April 6	Toronto	3:30
April 8	New Orleans	7:30
April 10	Atlanta	7:30
April 11	at Minnesota	9:00
April 13	New York	1:00

All times Eastern



ATLANTIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **2ND**

KNICKS

Not since the franchise shipped out Patrick Ewing following a run to the 2000 Eastern Conference finals has there been a season filled with such expectations. After years spent squandering draft picks and free-agent dollars, and then more years saving picks and dollars for the right star, the Knicks have made their big bet.

Seeing the division-rival Boston Celtics win their 18th championship behind the league's most versatile roster, New York's front office doubled down on the acquisition of OG Anunoby by re-signing him to the largest contract in franchise history and then pairing him with Mikal Bridges at the expense of nearly all their future draft equity.

The bet is simple: Rather than wait for the perfect star, let's go get the perfect fit and add Bridges to the Villanova core. Part of that bet, and the biggest part of that core, is Jalen Brunson. They believe last season proved he could be the best player on a title team. His prime is now; thus, their time is now.

With Brunson leading the offensive charge, the blueprint is a simple one — insulate the All-Star's defensive shortcomings on one end while surrounding him with complementary pieces on the other.

FRONTCOURT

Not all All-Stars are created equal, and Julius Randle certainly doesn't have the same reputation as other All-NBA honorees of recent vintage.

At the same time, he comfortably remains New York's second-most threatening offensive force after Brunson, who wore down in the 2024 postseason because of the monumental load he had to carry. The Knicks need Randle to tap into his best qualities and eliminate his inconsistencies, much like he did during New York's 15-2 stretch when they were at full health last January.

At his best, Randle is the perfect second star on offense, commanding attention inside the arc with a blend of skill and physicality that few modern players can match. That attention provides Brunson with almost all of his open catch-and-shoot attempts from long range, which is necessary to keep the diminutive guard highly efficient and fresh for the long haul. Following the Anunoby trade, Randle also tapped



JULIUS RANDLE

SCOUTING THE KNICKS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Getting Mikal Bridges was an absolute coup. They have the type of winner in [Jalen] Brunson who will make sure he fits seamlessly. ... If they can stay healthy, they are stacked and will challenge Boston and Philadelphia. On paper, the Knicks are true contenders. ... With Bridges, someone will have to adjust to getting fewer shots. I'd say the candidates are [OG] Anunoby and [Julius] Randle. ... The one thing they're lacking is an additional rim-protector. ... I'm sure Tom Thibodeau will get it figured out. Because of him, I may like their chances to come out of the East better than anyone."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 21-45
DIVISION: 5TH

2020-21
Record: 41-31
DIVISION: 3RD

2021-22
Record: 37-45
DIVISION: 5TH

2022-23
Record: 47-35
DIVISION: 3RD

2023-24
Record: 50-32
DIVISION: 2ND

FROM LEFT: VINCENT CARCHIETTA-USA TODAY SPORTS; WENDELL CRUZ-USA TODAY SPORTS



JALEN BRUNSON



BEYOND THE ARC

Rising in the ranks If Julius Randle maintains his current career scoring average as a Knick of 22.6 points per game, he'd need to appear in 79 games to move into 10th place all time on the franchise's scoring list, passing Hall of Famer Bill Bradley.

Brunson burner After becoming the first Knick since Carmelo Anthony to finish in the top five in MVP voting last season, Jalen Brunson will try to become the first New York point guard to make first-team All-NBA since Walt "Clyde" Frazier exactly 50 years ago.

Bargain basement New York's four former Villanova Wildcats — Brunson, Mikal Bridges, Josh Hart and Donte DiVincenzo — will earn a combined \$77.8 million this season, or \$6.4 million more than the last year of Jayson Tatum's recently signed max extension.

Mr. Robinson's neighborhood Mitchell Robinson hasn't always been able to stay healthy, but his longevity remains a strong suit. This season, he'll join Anthony as the only Knicks since 2000 to play seven consecutive seasons in New York.

Off the schneid? Following their 50-win season last year, the Knicks will pursue 50 wins for a second consecutive season. The last time they did that? Patrick Ewing, John Starks and Charles Oakley were leading the charge under Pat Riley in his final season as Knicks coach 30 years ago.



into his playmaking even more, eschewing turnovers and ball-hogging tendencies to keep the offense flowing. That has to continue, along with his dual bellwethers of engaged off-ball defense and willingness to fire away from deep.

Randle will need to be at his best following the departure of Isaiah Hartenstein, who became a vital two-way hub for New York. The more offensively limited Mitchell Robinson is back, although the presence of Anunoby and the addition of Bridges will allow the Knicks to tap into small-ball lineups far more than they ever have under head coach Tom Thibodeau. As usual, Robinson’s health will be a key.

As for Anunoby, the question will be how much more offensive firepower the league’s preeminent role player is capable of providing beyond spacing to the corner and attacking the occasional closeout. It remains to be seen how much the addition of Bridges will lessen the already limited on-ball opportunities Anunoby receives, but he’ll need to punish teams who elect to send weak defenders his way.

Off the bench, expect little drop-off with Josh Hart, who has become the team’s heart and soul in more ways than one. Precious Achiuwa probably wasn’t the Knicks’ ideal choice for a backup center, but he checks the boxes for now.

BACKCOURT

Jalen Brunson, all day, every day. Brunson has ascended to Jeterian levels of popularity for good reason. He is the rare guard whose dominant skill is calling his own number but who never gets dinged for selfishness or poor shot selection. That’s mostly because almost no shot is a “bad” shot for Brunson, who routinely makes the impossible look easy with a post-up game that more closely resembles Kevin McHale than anyone his own size.

Brunson has improved his outside game since coming to New York, although it was always a strong suit, becoming a knockdown catch-and-shoot marksman and enough of a respectable pull-up threat to force defenders over screens.

The challenge for Thibs will be to continue devising ways to survive defensively with a small guard, which is where pairing Brunson with Bridges should pay immediate dividends. Few wing defenders are better at navigating screens, and the Knicks have been missing a true point-of-attack defender since trading

24.5

The trio of Jalen Brunson, Julius Randle and OG Anunoby played just 285 minutes together last year, but they outscored their opponents by 24.5 points per 100 possessions in that time. New York’s hopes figure to rest on whether they can repeat that level of effectiveness.



OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

- 1. Pacome Dadiet
SF, 6-8, 210, Ratiopharm Ulm (BBL)
- 2. Tyler Kolek
PG, 6-3, 195, Marquette
- 2. Kevin McCullar Jr.
SF, 6-6, 210, Kansas
- 2. Ariel Hukporti
C, 6-11, 246, MHP Riesen Ludwigsburg

The class’ on-court impact figures to be minimal, at least initially. Kolek, whom the Knicks traded up to get in the second round, has the best shot of seeing court time.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Keita Bates-Diop arrived alongside Mikal Bridges in a trade with Brooklyn. Bates-Diop has prior experience playing for Tom Thibodeau but is likely to be little more than a depth piece.

ROSTER																48-MINUTE		
HEAD COACH: TOM THIBODEAU (5TH SEASON; CAREER: 527-389)																PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG	REB	AST	PTS
11	Jalen Brunson	G	6-2	190	8/31/96	Villanova	6	77	35.4	.479	.401	.847	3.6	6.7	28.7	4.9	9.1	38.9
30	Julius Randle	F/C	6-8	250	11/29/94	Kentucky	10	46	35.4	.472	.311	.781	9.2	5.0	24.0	12.5	6.7	32.4
1	Mikal Bridges	G/F	6-6	209	8/30/96	Villanova	6	82	34.8	.436	.372	.814	4.5	3.6	19.6	6.3	5.0	27.0
0	Donte DiVincenzo	G	6-4	203	1/31/97	Villanova	6	81	29.1	.443	.401	.754	3.7	2.7	15.5	6.0	4.4	25.6
8	OG Anunoby	F/G	6-7	240	7/17/97	Indiana	7	50	34.0	.489	.382	.753	4.2	2.1	14.7	5.9	3.0	20.7
3	Josh Hart	G	6-4	215	3/06/95	Villanova	7	81	33.4	.434	.310	.791	8.3	4.1	9.4	12.0	5.9	13.5
2	Miles McBride	G	6-1	195	9/08/00	West Virginia	3	68	19.5	.452	.410	.860	1.5	1.7	8.3	3.6	4.1	20.3
5	Precious Achiuwa	F	6-8	243	9/19/99	Memphis	4	74	21.9	.501	.268	.616	6.6	1.3	7.6	14.4	2.9	16.7
22	Cameron Payne	G	6-3	183	8/08/94	Murray State	9	78	16.7	.432	.390	.866	1.5	2.6	7.4	4.3	7.5	21.3
23	Mitchell Robinson	C/F	7-0	240	4/01/98	Western Kentucky	6	31	24.8	.575	.000	.409	8.5	0.6	5.6	16.4	1.1	10.8
13	Keita Bates-Diop	F	6-8	229	9/23/96	Ohio State	6	53	12.5	.434	.304	.762	2.1	0.7	3.7	7.9	2.7	14.2
	Chuma Okeke	F	6-7	229	8/18/98	Auburn	4	47	9.2	.357	.280	.571	1.7	0.4	2.3	8.9	2.2	11.9
45	Jericho Sims	C	6-10	250	10/20/98	Texas	3	45	13.0	.691	.000	.667	3.3	0.6	2.0	12.1	2.1	7.6
00	Jacob Toppin	F	6-8	200	5/08/00	Kentucky	1	9	4.2	.556	.250	1.000	0.8	0.3	1.4	8.8	3.8	16.4
	Pacome Dadiet	F	6-8	210	7/27/05	Ratiopharm Ulm												
	Ariel Hukporti	C	6-11	246	4/12/02	Riesen Ludwigsburg												
	Tyler Kolek	G	6-3	195	3/27/01	Marquette												
	Kevin McCullar Jr.	G	6-6	210	3/15/01	Kansas												



DONTE DIVINCENZO

away Quentin Grimes last season. Offensively, Bridges’ role should more closely resemble the one he had in Phoenix, although his time as Brooklyn’s top option should come in handy. He’ll be called upon to support the non-Brunson minutes that have been New York’s bugaboo for the past two years.

Moving to the bench is Donte DiVincenzo, who grew into one the NBA’s leading deep threats following injuries to Randle and Anunoby last season. The league’s leader in made 3-pointers after the All-Star break should enter this season as a top candidate for Sixth Man of the Year. He instantly juices any offensive alignment and is a havoc-wreaking defender off the ball.

The eighth man is Miles “Deuce” McBride, who is really more of a small wing than a traditional backup point guard, which makes the drafting of Tyler Kolek and signing of Cameron Payne both notable. Even given his preferred nine-man rotation, it’ll be interesting to see how Thibs navigates the minutes crunch.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Knicks are both a known quantity and a mystery box. On one hand, they will be supremely coached, compete every night, dominate the boards, take care of the ball, play effective drop defense that packs the paint and strive to force two on the ball during every halfcourt offensive possession.

On the other hand, there are so many new questions. How much more will the Knicks switch? Will they go small? Can Randle be a championship-level second star alongside this much surrounding talent? Will Bridges’ secondary creation embolden them to move Randle at some point? Will DiVincenzo’s shooting ascension continue? Can Anunoby and Robinson stay healthy? And of course, is Brunson’s best still yet to come?

Even with these questions, the Knicks will be an excellent regular-season team (think a win total in the mid-50s) and a tough out in the playoffs.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Boston	7:30
Oct. 25	Indiana	7:30
Oct. 28	Cleveland	7:30
Oct. 30	at Miami	7:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 4	at Houston	8:45
Nov. 6	at Atlanta	7:30
Nov. 8	Milwaukee	7:30
Nov. 10	at Indiana	5:00
Nov. 12	at Philadelphia	7:30
Nov. 13	Chicago	7:30
Nov. 15	Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 17	Brooklyn	7:00
Nov. 18	Washington	7:30
Nov. 20	at Phoenix	10:00
Nov. 23	at Utah	5:00
Nov. 25	at Denver	9:00
Nov. 27	at Dallas	7:30
Nov. 29	at Charlotte	12:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	New Orleans	6:00
Dec. 3	Orlando	7:30
Dec. 5	Charlotte	7:30
Dec. 7	Detroit	7:30
Dec. 9	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	at Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 21	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 23	Toronto	7:30
Dec. 25	San Antonio	12:00
Dec. 27	at Orlando	7:00
Dec. 28	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 30	at Washington	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Utah	7:30
Jan. 3	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 4	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 6	Orlando	7:30
Jan. 8	Toronto	7:00
Jan. 10	Oklahoma City	7:30
Jan. 12	Milwaukee	3:00
Jan. 13	Detroit	7:30
Jan. 15	at Philadelphia	7:30
Jan. 17	Minnesota	7:30
Jan. 20	Atlanta	3:00
Jan. 21	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 25	Sacramento	7:30
Jan. 27	Memphis	7:30
Jan. 29	Denver	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	L.A. Lakers	8:30
Feb. 3	Houston	7:30
Feb. 4	at Toronto	7:30
Feb. 8	Boston	8:30
Feb. 11	at Indiana	7:30
Feb. 12	Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 20	Chicago	7:30

Feb. 21	at Cleveland	7:00
Feb. 23	at Boston	1:00
Feb. 26	Philadelphia	7:00
Feb. 28	at Memphis	8:00

MARCH

March 2	at Miami	6:00
March 4	Golden State	7:30
March 6	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
March 7	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 10	at Sacramento	10:30
March 12	at Portland	10:00
March 15	at Golden State	8:30
March 17	Miami	7:30
March 19	at San Antonio	8:00
March 20	at Charlotte	7:00
March 22	Washington	8:00
March 25	Dallas	7:30
March 26	L.A. Clippers	7:30
March 28	at Milwaukee	8:00
March 30	Portland	6:00

APRIL

April 1	Philadelphia	7:30
April 2	at Cleveland	7:00
April 5	at Atlanta	3:00
April 6	Phoenix	7:00
April 8	Boston	7:30
April 10	at Detroit	7:00
April 11	Cleveland	7:30
April 13	at Brooklyn	1:00

All times Eastern



PHI 76ERS

Can the Philadelphia 76ers live up to their preseason hype? That's the main question surrounding the franchise heading into the 2024-25 season.

On paper, the Sixers are in the top tier with the defending NBA champion Boston Celtics and New York Knicks in the Eastern Conference hierarchy. The Celtics are more battle-tested, while the Knicks are the league's deepest team.

Yet anything less than a conference finals appearance would be a major failure for the Sixers. Being the last team standing after the NBA Finals is definitely their goal.

It's a legitimate aspiration after the Sixers signed nine-time All-Star Paul George to a four-year, \$212 million contract this summer to form a Big Three with Joel Embiid and Tyrese Maxey. They also acquired Caleb Martin, Andre Drummond, Eric Gordon, Reggie Jackson and Guerschon Yabusele along with re-signing Kelly Oubre Jr., Kyle Lowry, KJ Martin and Maxey in free agency.

George, Embiid, and Maxey have the opportunity to be Philly's best trio since Hall of Famers Julius Erving, Maurice Cheeks and Charles Barkley were all named All-Stars during the 1986-87 campaign. That marked the last time the Sixers had three participants in the same All-Star Game. The expectation is that George, Embiid and Maxey will snap the team's All-Star trio drought in February's All-Star Game in San Francisco.



TYRESE MAXEY

SCOUTING THE 76ERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"They made a lot of nice additions on paper, but I don't know if they'll lead to more success. ... This team will still go as Joel Embiid and Tyrese Maxey go. ... Paul George is a big question mark. I don't know that they will get what they're hoping for from him. If so, they could really go places. ... Caleb Martin was a wildly underrated addition, but he's fairly up and down. ... Andre Drummond and Eric Gordon were nice additions considering they'll be coming off the bench. ... They're a real threat to win the East, but there are a lot of factors at play — Embiid's health, George's fit, Martin's consistency, etc."

FRONTCOURT

George, entering his 15th season, is a six-time All-NBA selection, a four-time All-Defensive pick and the 2012-13 Most Improved Player. The 6-foot-8, 220-pounder is still one of the best wings in the league despite being 34.

The Los Angeles Clippers relied heavily on George to be their first or second scoring option the past five seasons. As a Sixer, he won't be forced to carry as much of the load, serving instead as a secondary option behind Embiid.

The biggest question mark is Embiid's health, given his history of missing games due to injuries. When he's healthy, the 7-foot, 280-pound center is the league's most dominant player. The 2022-23 MVP has career averages of 27.9 points, 11.2 rebounds, 3.6 assists, 1.7 blocks and 3.4

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 43-30
DIVISION: 3RD

2020-21
Record: 49-23
DIVISION: 1ST

2021-22
Record: 51-31
DIVISION: 2ND

2022-23
Record: 54-28
DIVISION: 2ND

2023-24
Record: 47-35
DIVISION: 3RD

FROM LEFT: BILL STREICHER-USA TODAY SPORTS; BRAD PENNER-USA TODAY SPORTS



JOEL EMBIID



BEYOND THE ARC

Olympian Joel Embiid is the first Sixers player to win a gold medal at the Olympics for Team USA. Luke Jackson won a gold medal with the 1964 team, but he hadn't played a game for the Sixers yet. Andre Iguodala was traded during the 2012 Summer Games, while Charles Barkley was traded two months before the 1992 Games.

Homegrown Kyle Lowry and rookie two-way player Justin Edwards are homegrown talents. Lowry is a product of Philly's Cardinal Dougherty High School and Villanova University. Meanwhile, Edwards came out of Imhotep Charter High.

Family name Ricky Council IV shares a name with his father, Ricky Council Sr., and older brothers, Ricky Council II and Ricky Council III. Council has multiple nicknames — "The Fourth" and "C4" — to differentiate him from his father and brothers.

International flavor The Sixers have four players born internationally in Embiid, Guerschon Yabusele, Reggie Jackson, second-round pick Adem Bona and two-way rookie David Jones. Embiid, a native of Cameroon, became a United States citizen in 2022. Yabusele is a Frenchman who played for his native country in the Olympics. Bona was born in Nigeria and moved to Turkey. Jones is from the Dominican Republic. And Jackson was born in Italy while his father, Saul, who was an Air Force officer, was stationed there.



turnovers in 433 games. Embiid is also a two-time scoring champion, a five-time All-NBA selection, a three-time All-Defensive pick, a seven-time Eastern Conference Player of the Month and a 14-time Player of the Week.

However, the 30-year-old Embiid, who helped Team USA win a gold medal at the Paris Olympics, has missed 336 games — the equivalent of four seasons — since being selected third overall in the 2014 NBA Draft. Last season, he averaged 34.7 points, 11.0 rebounds, 5.6 assists, 1.7 blocks and 1.2 steals while playing in only 39 games as he battled a torn lateral meniscus in his left knee. Injuries aside, he’s an annual MVP candidate, and his presence alone makes the Sixers championship contenders.

Yabusele, whose breakout performance in Paris for Team France earned him another NBA shot after he was waived by the Celtics in 2019, fills a sturdy power forward need, although the 6-foot-8, 271-pounder might be better suited to come off the bench. Still, he will give the Sixers a lift when it comes to having someone capable of guarding power forwards such as Knicks All-Star Julius Randle.

Yabusele and the undersized KJ Martin (6-foot-6) are the only power forwards on the roster, which is a weakness. But in Drummond, the Sixers added a backup center insurance policy in case Embiid gets injured or needs rest. It’s a role that the 6-foot-11, 279-pound two-time All-Star filled during the 2021-22 season before reluctantly being packaged in a blockbuster trade to the Brooklyn Nets for James Harden.

Drummond, 31, brings rebounding to a squad that struggled in that category last season. The four-time rebounding champion averaged 9.0 rebounds in 17.1 minutes last season with the Bulls. The Sixers ranked 20th in the league at 43.0 rebounds per game.

BACKCOURT

Another question facing the Sixers this season: Will Maxey continue to raise his ceiling? The point guard signed a five-year, \$203.8 million deal in July. With that deal comes added expectations for the 2023-24 Most Improved Player. But will he be able to meet those expectations, especially with George expected to take away some of his shot attempts?

Maxey averaged career highs in points (25.9), rebounds (3.7), assists (6.2),



5

The Sixers have five players with at least 12 seasons of NBA experience in Andre Drummond (12), Reggie Jackson (13), Paul George (14), Eric Gordon (16) and Kyle Lowry (18).

OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

1. **Jared McCain**
PG/SG, 6-3, 195, Duke
2. **Adem Bona**
C, 6-10, 235, UCLA

If all goes well, this will be a season of observing for the Sixers rookies. That’s because the team added “win-now” veterans in free agency who will make minutes hard to come by for McCain and Bona.

Other Newcomers

The Sixers had the splashiest offseason in the NBA, adding superstar Paul George along with Caleb Martin, Andre Drummond, Eric Gordon, Reggie Jackson and Guerchon Yabusele. George joins Joel Embiid and Tyrese Maxey in forming a championship-caliber Big Three in Philly.

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY								
HEAD COACH: NICK NURSE (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 274-198)																	2023-24 STATISTICS								
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS						
21	Joel Embiid	C/F	7-0	280	3/16/94	Kansas	8	39	33.6	.529	.388	.883	11.0	5.6	34.7		15.8	8.0	49.6						
0	Tyrese Maxey	G	6-2	200	11/04/00	Kentucky	4	70	37.5	.450	.373	.868	3.7	6.2	25.9		4.7	7.9	33.2						
8	Paul George	F	6-8	220	5/02/90	Fresno State	14	74	33.8	.471	.413	.907	5.2	3.5	22.6		7.4	5.0	32.1						
9	Kelly Oubre Jr.	F/G	6-7	203	12/09/95	Kansas	9	68	30.2	.441	.311	.750	5.0	1.5	15.4		8.0	2.4	24.5						
23	Eric Gordon	G	6-3	215	12/25/88	Indiana	16	68	27.8	.443	.378	.797	1.8	2.0	11.0		3.1	3.5	19.0						
	Reggie Jackson	G	6-2	208	4/16/90	Boston College	13	82	22.2	.431	.359	.806	1.9	3.8	10.2		4.1	8.1	22.0						
16	Caleb Martin	F	6-5	205	9/28/95	Nevada	5	64	27.4	.431	.349	.778	4.4	2.2	10.0		7.7	3.9	17.5						
3	Andre Drummond	C	6-11	279	8/10/93	Connecticut	12	79	17.1	.556	.000	.592	9.0	0.5	8.4		25.2	1.3	23.6						
7	Kyle Lowry	G	6-0	196	3/25/86	Villanova	18	60	28.2	.432	.392	.840	3.2	4.2	8.1		5.5	7.2	13.8						
16	Ricky Council IV	G	6-6	207	8/03/01	Arkansas	1	32	9.0	.482	.375	.746	1.4	0.5	5.4		7.6	2.7	28.8						
11	Jeff Downtin Jr.	G	6-3	177	5/10/97	Rhode Island	3	12	11.8	.556	.474	.750	1.7	2.3	4.3		6.8	9.1	17.6						
1	KJ Martin	F	6-6	215	1/06/01	IMG (FL) Academy	4	60	12.4	.536	.286	.537	2.2	0.9	3.7		8.4	3.3	14.4						
30	Adem Bona	F	6-10	235	3/28/03	UCLA		R — First NBA Season																	
	Justin Edwards	F	6-8	203	12/16/03	Kentucky		R — First NBA Season																	
	David Jones	F	6-6	210	11/24/01	Memphis		R — First NBA Season																	
20	Jared McCain	G	6-3	195	2/20/04	Duke		R — First NBA Season																	



PAUL GEORGE

steals (1.0) and minutes (37.5) last season. He scored a career-high 52 points in a double-overtime road victory over the Spurs on April 7. Maxey had two other 50-point outings: 51 points in a road victory over the Jazz on Feb. 1 and 50 points in a home win over the Pacers on Nov. 12.

Sixers head coach Nick Nurse thinks Oubre (6-foot-7), Caleb Martin (6-foot-5) and George are all interchangeable in the shooting guard through power forward positions.

Gordon will be looked to for depth. The 35-year-old swingman is a career 37.1 percent 3-point shooter who averaged 11.0 points while shooting 37.8 percent from deep last season as a Phoenix Sun. The 16-year veteran could be a solid acquisition depending on what he has left in the tank.

The same can be said about Lowry. The point guard, who turned 38 on March 25, was the seventh-oldest player in the NBA last season. The six-time All-Star is embarking on his 19th season after averaging 8.1 points and 4.2 assists last season with Sixers and Miami Heat. As the only true point guard, his leadership and ability to create shots for others will be key to Philly’s success.

The backcourt possesses a diverse set of skills. Maxey is an elite scorer. Jackson is a scoring point guard who can play with Maxey and Lowry. And rookie Jared McCain is more of a shooting guard on the NBA level, but the 16th overall pick will have a tough time getting major minutes this season for a veteran-laden squad.

FINAL ANALYSIS

This is a team with serious championship aspirations. The Sixers have the star power, depth and experience needed to dethrone the Celtics. If the stars can co-exist and stay healthy, this could be Philadelphia’s best season since reaching the NBA Finals in 2001.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Milwaukee	7:30
Oct. 25	at Toronto	7:00
Oct. 27	at Indiana	3:30
Oct. 30	Detroit	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Memphis	7:30
Nov. 4	at Phoenix	10:15
Nov. 6	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
Nov. 8	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Nov. 10	Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 12	New York	7:30
Nov. 13	Cleveland	7:30
Nov. 15	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 18	at Miami	7:30
Nov. 20	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 22	Brooklyn	7:00
Nov. 24	L.A. Clippers	6:00
Nov. 27	Houston	7:00
Nov. 30	at Detroit	7:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 3	at Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 4	Orlando	7:30
Dec. 6	Orlando	7:00
Dec. 8	at Chicago	1:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 20	Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 21	at Cleveland	8:00

Dec. 23	San Antonio	7:00
Dec. 25	at Boston	5:00
Dec. 28	at Utah	9:30
Dec. 30	at Portland	10:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 2	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 4	at Brooklyn	6:00
Jan. 6	Phoenix	7:00
Jan. 8	Washington	7:00
Jan. 10	New Orleans	7:00
Jan. 12	at Orlando	6:00
Jan. 14	Oklahoma City	7:00
Jan. 15	New York	7:30
Jan. 18	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 19	at Milwaukee	7:00
Jan. 21	at Denver	10:00
Jan. 24	Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 25	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 28	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Jan. 29	Sacramento	7:30
Jan. 31	Denver	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	Boston	6:00
Feb. 4	Dallas	7:30
Feb. 5	Miami	7:30
Feb. 7	at Detroit	7:30
Feb. 9	at Milwaukee	2:00
Feb. 11	Toronto	7:00
Feb. 12	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 20	Boston	7:00

Feb. 22	Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 24	Chicago	7:00
Feb. 26	at New York	7:00

MARCH

March 1	Golden State	8:30
March 3	Portland	7:00
March 4	at Minnesota	8:00
March 6	at Boston	7:30
March 9	Utah	7:30
March 10	at Atlanta	7:30
March 12	at Toronto	7:30
March 14	Indiana	7:00
March 16	at Dallas	1:00
March 17	at Houston	8:00
March 19	at Oklahoma City	8:00
March 21	at San Antonio	8:00
March 23	at Atlanta	6:00
March 24	at New Orleans	8:00
March 26	Washington	7:00
March 29	Miami	7:30
March 30	Toronto	7:30

APRIL

April 1	at New York	7:30
April 3	Milwaukee	7:30
April 5	Minnesota	7:00
April 7	at Miami	7:30
April 9	at Washington	7:00
April 11	Atlanta	7:00
April 13	Chicago	1:00

All times Eastern



ATLANTIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **4TH**

TOR RAPTORS

Clearly, the Toronto Raptors have devoted most of their financial resources toward Scottie Barnes and Immanuel Quickley. What isn't as clear: After parting ways with the final pieces of their 2018-19 NBA title team (Pascal Siakam, OG Anunoby) before last season's trade deadline, does the Raptors' continued commitment to Barnes and Quickley signal the beginning of a rebuild? Or can the duo develop quickly enough to ensure the Raptors make the playoffs for the first time in three seasons?

"You say rebuild, but I just want to win now," Barnes told reporters after inking a five-year extension worth up to \$270 million.

Entering his fourth NBA season, the 23-year-old Barnes wants to prove his worth as the franchise's cornerstone after showing improved 3-point shooting, playmaking and positional versatility. After agreeing to a five-year, \$175 million deal, Quickley also views the Raptors' timeline to contention as "right now." Both players are aware the Raptors won an NBA championship and made seven consecutive playoff appearances not too long ago (2014-20).

Should the Raptors' franchise cornerstones feel optimistic about the team's trajectory? Or are they setting themselves up for disappointment? Most likely the latter.

FRONTCOURT

Toronto's fortunes start and end with Barnes, and he has all the tools needed to become a star player. He has tons of athleticism. He can drive to the basket. He has developed an outside shot. He has shown improvement in making the right play. He can defend multiple positions. He has fully healed from a left hand injury suffered in March that required surgery. Teammates appear to like him for his work habits and positive attitude.

And yet, at least in the short term, Barnes also faces some uncertainty. Can he become more consistent? Can he play aggressively enough to earn more foul calls? Will officials respect him more? Will he become comfortable as the No. 1 option instead of just a complementary piece? Has he matured enough to become one of the team's leaders? Can he handle the ensuing expectations and criticism?



RJ BARRETT

SCOUTING THE RAPTORS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"This is clearly Scottie Barnes' team, but there isn't much around him. Since the start of last year, they've lost Pascal Siakam, OG Anunoby and now Gary Trent Jr. (to Milwaukee). ... Immanuel Quickley and RJ Barrett are nice players, but they're third and fourth options on good teams. Here, they are 1B and 2. ... I think they're counting on Grady Dick starting at shooting guard, but I haven't seen any evidence that he's ready. ... Are they trying to win? Playing the lottery? I don't even know if they decided. They certainly don't have any reason to have any sort of playoff hopes as constructed."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 53-19
DIVISION: 1ST

2020-21
Record: 27-45
DIVISION: 5TH

2021-22
Record: 48-34
DIVISION: 3RD

2022-23
Record: 41-41
DIVISION: 5TH

2023-24
Record: 25-57
DIVISION: 5TH

FROM LEFT: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS



SCOTTIE BARNES



BEYOND THE ARC

Blame game Raptors president Masai Ujiri took partial blame for the team's losing season and for how he handled Pascal Siakam's eventual trade to the Indiana Pacers. "Maybe that is partly my fault and partly things coming at us in different ways," Ujiri told reporters. "That's not who we are. That's not what I wanted to be. That's not what this team, the fans, this city deserve in any way."

Money talks Neither Scottie Barnes nor Immanuel Quickley planned to go on any spending sprees to celebrate their new contracts. "I don't know what I'm going to do with it, to be honest," Barnes told reporters. "It's a lot of money. You just got to think it over."

No love lost When the Sacramento Kings visit Toronto, will DeMar DeRozan and Drake interact at all? They often dapped each other up when DeRozan became a fan favorite during his nine years with the Raptors (2009-18). This summer, though, DeRozan danced on stage with Kendrick Lamar while Lamar performed his Drake-themed diss track, "Not Like Us."

A slice of victory Amid the team's ongoing struggles last season, head coach Darko Rajaković promised he would treat the players to dinner if they posted a three-game winning streak. After the Raptors reached that goal, Rajaković obliged the team's wishes to have a pizza party.



Barnes likely will show both promise and growing pains in these areas, but he won't have much help in the frontcourt to absorb any off nights.

Center Jakob Poeltl is a solid rim protector with his physical presence and communication. But he doesn't shut down elite bigs, make many outside shots or space the floor enough. Poeltl would better thrive as a complementary piece on a winning team than as a steady rotation player on a losing one.

Small forwards RJ Barrett and Bruce Brown are very serviceable. Since the Raptors acquired him before the trade deadline, Barrett has vastly improved with his decision-making and playing downhill. Despite Team Canada's shortcomings in the Paris Olympics, Barrett should enter training camp in great shape. Brown has become a valued two-way player for his perimeter defense and reliable outside shooting. But both have limitations. Barrett still remains a work in progress with his shooting, and it's unclear if he can become the Raptors' third star. Brown is a dependable role player, but his value dips when he's thrust into a bigger role.

BACKCOURT

At least Barnes has a trusted teammate in Quickley, who has proven he can excel in a starting role in Toronto after mostly coming off the bench for the New York Knicks. With an increased role, Quickley will continue to improve his play-making, outside shooting and attacking the rim. Even with a bigger workload, Quickley has shown he still can play at a fast pace on both ends of the floor. Though the Raptors made the right decision by securing him as a restricted free agent, Quickley will need time before he actually develops into a star. It appears likely that Quickley will spend his fifth NBA season showing that he has a high ceiling without yet reaching it.

As for the rest of the Raptors' backcourt? They have second-year guard Gradey Dick, backup point guard Davion Mitchell and veteran guard Garrett Temple. All are valuable players. Dick was one of the leaders in his rookie class in scoring and shooting due to increased playing time following the trade deadline and the team's flood of injuries in March. Mitchell has become a productive

12

The Raptors had gone 12 consecutive seasons without 50 losses before their 25-57 2023-24 campaign. That marked the NBA's longest active streak behind the Miami Heat (15 seasons). The Raptors enter this season with both opportunity and uncertainty as to whether they can accelerate their rebuild.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

- 1. Ja’Kobe Walter
SG, 6-5, 180, Baylor
 - 2. Jonathan Mogbo
SF/PF, 6-9, 225, San Francisco
 - 2. Jamal Shead
PG, 6-1, 200, Houston
 - 2. Ulrich Chomche
C, 6-11, 235, NBA Acad. Africa
- The Raptors used their draft picks on young talent that could either play right away (Walter, Mogbo) or pan out in the future (Shead, Chomche).

Other Newcomers

The Raptors acquired a likely backup point guard (Davion Mitchell), the draft rights to Shead (No. 45 pick), and a 2025 second-round pick from Sacramento for reserve forward Jalen McDaniels.

ROSTER							2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: DARKO RAJAKOVIĆ (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 25-57)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
9	RJ Barrett	F/G	6-6	214	6/14/00	Duke	5	58	31.7	.495	.360	.715	5.4	3.3	20.2		8.2	5.0	30.6
4	Scottie Barnes	F/G	6-7	237	8/01/01	Florida State	3	60	34.9	.475	.341	.781	8.2	6.1	19.9		11.3	8.3	27.3
5	Immanuel Quickley	G	6-2	190	6/17/99	Kentucky	4	68	29.2	.434	.395	.853	3.8	4.9	17.0		6.3	8.0	27.9
19	Jakob Poeltl	C	7-0	260	10/15/95	Utah	8	50	26.4	.656	.000	.551	8.6	2.5	11.1		15.6	4.6	20.2
11	Bruce Brown	G/F	6-4	202	8/15/96	Miami	6	67	27.8	.478	.323	.824	4.2	2.9	10.8		7.3	4.9	18.7
41	Kelly Olynyk	F/C	6-11	240	4/19/91	Gonzaga	11	78	22.5	.555	.387	.833	5.3	4.4	9.8		11.2	9.5	20.8
1	Gradey Dick	G/F	6-6	200	11/20/03	Kansas	1	60	21.1	.425	.365	.863	2.2	1.1	8.5		5.0	2.6	19.3
25	Chris Boucher	F	6-9	200	1/11/93	Oregon	7	50	14.1	.507	.330	.772	4.1	0.5	6.4		14.1	1.6	21.9
24	Bruno Fernando	F/C	6-9	240	8/15/98	Maryland	5	45	15.2	.583	.000	.667	4.3	1.0	6.3		13.6	3.2	19.8
30	Ochai Agbaji	G	6-5	215	4/20/00	Kansas	2	78	21.0	.411	.294	.661	2.8	1.1	5.8		6.3	2.4	13.3
15	Davion Mitchell	G	6-0	202	9/05/98	Baylor	3	72	15.3	.452	.361	.714	1.3	1.9	5.3		4.1	5.8	16.5
17	Garrett Temple	G/F	6-5	195	5/08/86	LSU	14	27	10.7	.372	.300	.818	1.7	1.0	3.3		7.5	4.7	14.6
3	DJ Carton	G	6-3	200	8/05/00	Marquette	1	4	8.9	.375	.250	.800	1.0	0.8	2.8		5.4	4.1	14.9
	Jamison Battle	F	6-7	220	5/10/01	Ohio State													
	Branden Carlson	C	7-0	220	6/14/99	Utah													
	Ulrich Chomche	C	6-11	235	12/30/05	NBA Global Academy													
	Jonathan Mogbo	F	6-9	225	10/29/01	San Francisco													
	Jamal Shead	G	6-1	200	7/24/02	Houston													
	Ja’Kobe Walter	G	6-5	180	9/04/04	Baylor													



IMMANUEL QUICKLEY

scorer and one of the league’s best on-ball defenders because of his quickness and strength. Temple remains one of the league’s most respected veterans for his steady play and leadership.

Add it all up, though, and the Raptors have a merely solid backcourt around Quickley. Dick needs to further develop all parts of his game. Though Mitchell can guard the opponent’s best perimeter players, his value will wear off if he’s granted starter-type minutes. Temple won’t screw up anything on the court, but he’s not going to swing the game’s outcome, either.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Raptors are in a predicament. They seem decent enough to stay competitive in the Eastern Conference, but they don’t seem capable of threatening the conference’s top teams or even making the playoffs.

Barnes and Quickley will continue to flourish as young players. Second-year head coach Darko Rajaković will further learn the NBA game and continue to motivate and develop the young roster. But it seems inevitable that Barnes and Quickley will experience some rough patches with bigger roles, and the Raptors don’t have the depth to offset any of those struggles.

So while Barnes and Quickley further develop as franchise cornerstones, the Raptors should make everyone else available leading into the trade deadline to collect draft picks and clear up cap space. That can set up Toronto to achieve two goals. The Raptors can maximize their NBA Draft lottery odds to land Cooper Flagg or another top prospect in the coveted 2025 class, and they can have more flexibility to make significant free-agent signings next summer.

The short-term struggles might not sit well with Barnes and Quickley. At least they buy the duo some time, though. They can make their next leap forward this season without the pressure to win.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Cleveland	7:30
Oct. 25	Philadelphia	7:00
Oct. 26	at Minnesota	8:00
Oct. 28	Denver	7:30
Oct. 30	at Charlotte	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Nov. 2	Sacramento	7:30
Nov. 4	at Denver	10:00
Nov. 6	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 9	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 10	at L.A. Lakers	9:30
Nov. 12	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 15	Detroit	7:00
Nov. 16	at Boston	8:00
Nov. 18	Indiana	7:30
Nov. 21	Minnesota	7:30
Nov. 24	at Cleveland	7:30
Nov. 25	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 27	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 29	at Miami	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Miami	6:00
Dec. 3	Indiana	7:30
Dec. 5	Oklahoma City	7:30
Dec. 7	Dallas	7:30
Dec. 9	New York	7:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	Brooklyn	7:30
Dec. 22	Houston	6:00
Dec. 23	at New York	7:30
Dec. 26	at Memphis	8:00
Dec. 29	Atlanta	6:00
Dec. 31	at Boston	3:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 3	Orlando	7:30
Jan. 6	Milwaukee	7:30
Jan. 8	at New York	7:00
Jan. 9	at Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 11	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 13	Golden State	7:30
Jan. 15	Boston	7:30
Jan. 17	at Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 21	Orlando	7:30
Jan. 23	at Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 25	at Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 27	New Orleans	7:30
Jan. 29	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 31	Chicago	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	L.A. Clippers	3:30
Feb. 4	New York	7:30
Feb. 5	Memphis	7:30
Feb. 7	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 9	at Houston	2:00
Feb. 11	at Philadelphia	7:00

Feb. 12	Cleveland	7:30
Feb. 21	Miami	7:30
Feb. 23	Phoenix	6:00
Feb. 25	Boston	7:00
Feb. 26	at Indiana	7:00
Feb. 28	at Chicago	8:00

MARCH

March 2	at Orlando	6:00
March 4	at Orlando	7:00
March 7	Utah	7:30
March 8	Washington	7:30
March 10	Washington	7:30
March 12	Philadelphia	7:30
March 14	at Utah	9:30
March 16	at Portland	6:00
March 17	at Phoenix	10:00
March 19	at Golden State	10:00
March 23	San Antonio	6:00
March 24	at Washington	7:00
March 26	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 28	Charlotte	7:30
March 30	at Philadelphia	7:30

APRIL

April 1	at Chicago	8:00
April 3	Portland	7:30
April 4	Detroit	7:30
April 6	at Brooklyn	3:30
April 9	Charlotte	7:30
April 11	at Dallas	8:30
April 13	at San Antonio	3:30

All times Eastern



CENTRAL DIVISION PREDICTION: **4TH**

CHI BULLS

If there has been a glaring criticism of Chicago Bulls executive vice president of basketball operations Artūras Karnišovas the past few seasons, it has been his inability to move off his own roster build. He's like a parent who's too proud of his own child's mediocrity.

His roster has been not only far more flawed than productive, but also often injured.

Thanks to another smack in the face of reality by the Miami Heat in last April's play-in game loss, Karnišovas seemingly finally got the message. Changes were necessary.

Key backup center Andre Drummond was allowed to walk via free agency; Alex Caruso was traded to Oklahoma City for Josh Giddey; and the heart of the roster, DeMar DeRozan, was dealt in a three-team sign-and-trade that sent "The King of the Fourth" to Sacramento, with the Bulls recouping a pair of second-round draft picks and once-promising 2-guard Chris Duarte.

A minor pivot maybe a year too late?

Rebuilds seldom succeed when a team is only halfway invested. But as long as two-time All-Star guard Zach LaVine and center Nikola Vučević are on the roster, that's exactly what the Bulls are.

All Karnišovas can hope for now is that LaVine and Vučević start off the 2024-25 season playing at a high level and refuel interest from other teams by the February trade deadline. Thanks to a loaded 2025 draft class, that should really be the only goal for this organization.

The Bulls will keep their protected '25 first round pick from San Antonio if they can finish in the bottom 10. If they can't, there goes any hope of being in the Cooper Flagg sweepstakes or even having a shot at the likes of other highly regarded draft prospects such as Dylan Harper, Airious "Ace" Bailey or Nolan Traore.

As much as Karnišovas doesn't want the stigma of tanking, for the Bulls to get out of this mess, they probably need to take a step back for a year or two. Having LaVine and Vučević around hurts that prospect on a couple of fronts. First, the veterans could help the team stumble into a handful of wins. More importantly, however, Karnišovas will see his younger players lose out on key minutes while trying to bolster the veterans' trade value.



COBY WHITE

SCOUTING THE BULLS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"They're really just a mess after losing DeMar DeRozan (to Sacramento) for next to nothing. ... Worse, they still have Zach LaVine, and neither party wants to remain with the other. I just don't see any way they can trade him. Not with that contract. ... Trading Alex Caruso (to Oklahoma City) for Josh Giddey was a downgrade. And what do they do if Lonzo Ball is ready to play? Bring Giddey off the bench? Then why make that trade? ... I feel sorry for Billy Donovan. The front office has done him no favors. ... Their best bet is to just tank. I don't know that they will have much of a choice."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 22-43
DIVISION: 3RD

2020-21
Record: 31-41
DIVISION: 3RD

2021-22
Record: 46-36
DIVISION: 2ND

2022-23
Record: 40-42
DIVISION: 3RD

2023-24
Record: 39-43
DIVISION: 4TH

FROM LEFT: KAMIL KRZACZYNSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; MATT KROHN-USA TODAY SPORTS



NIKOLA VUČEVIĆ



BEYOND THE ARC

Mouth that roars What the Bulls are quickly finding out about rookie Matas Buzelis is that he might be the biggest trash talker in the rookie class. That was on display during Summer League and in the open runs. So what is Buzelis' go-to when messing with opponents? According to him, nothing that can be put into print. "I don't really say anything nice to anybody," he says.

Not picky enough Acquiring Josh Giddey for Alex Caruso was a bit of a head-scratcher because the Bulls didn't get any draft capital in return. Executive Artūras Karnišovas, however, explained it this way: "It's hard to acquire players this young, this productive, that early in their careers."

Summer school DeMar DeRozan will be missed off the court, especially in the summers. DeRozan would bring younger players to Los Angeles every offseason for a "boot camp" training session that had the likes of Coby White and Patrick Williams up at 4 a.m. every morning. "He put me through everything," Williams says.

Ball-ing out The Bulls have been hoping that Lonzo Ball and his injured left knee can be ready for the 2024-25 campaign, but they are taking a realistic approach, acquiring Giddey to be the starting point guard. Even if Ball can go, he will come off the bench and likely be placed on a severe minutes restriction.



FRONTCOURT

With the expected defensive holes in the backcourt, it will be on the shoulders of Patrick Williams, fresh off signing a five-year, \$90 million deal to stay with the Bulls, to help in that department. Rookie Matas Buzelis will push Williams, but Buzelis lacks the defensive ability and 3-point shooting that Williams brings to the starting lineup. Those are two strengths that this starting group will need badly.

Expect Buzelis, however, to get heavy playing time off the bench and be a key rotation piece as he learns the NBA game.

Jalen Smith, who was signed in free agency from the Pacers, will be Vučević's backup and could be the key component in Bulls head coach Billy Donovan's small-ball lineup that he likes to roll out for a handful of minutes every game.

Veteran Torrey Craig could be the odd man out with Donovan rarely using a 10-man rotation.

BACKCOURT

Giddey has already been given the wheel as the starting point guard spot, while Coby White — who finished second in the Most Improved Player Award voting last season — scoots over to the off-ball guard spot. But what about LaVine?

Does Donovan really want to hurt White's continued development by making him share the ball with LaVine or possibly come off the bench? White not only boosted his scoring average from 9.7 points per game in 2022-23 to 19.1 per game last season, but he also started to emerge as a finisher in close games. All of that came with LaVine sidelined due to season-ending foot surgery.

Donovan wants to get back to an up-tempo style of play that the Bulls displayed in the 2021-22 season, and that's why Giddey was acquired. But Donovan also expects a high level of defense. A starting combination of LaVine, Giddey and White not only hurts the defense but would also really struggle against teams with bigger wings. The Bulls slipped to 21st in the

103

That's the combined plus/minus for DeMar DeRozan and Alex Caruso in five-point games with two minutes or less left. So while the front office would never admit that the 2024-25 season is somewhat of a tank year, taking the best offensive player and defensive player out of the mix when games are on the line speaks differently.



OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICK

1. Matas Buzelis
PF/SF, 6-10, 209, G League Ignite

Buzelis, a versatile forward, was projected to be gone by No. 7, so when he fell to the Bulls at No. 11, it was like Christmas in June for Artūras Karnišovas & Co. Buzelis will be a key rotation piece in the youth movement.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Acquiring Josh Giddey from Oklahoma City for Alex Caruso was the big summer move. Giddey is penciled in to be the starting point guard. The Bulls were relatively quiet in free agency, inking Jalen Smith to a three-year, \$27 million deal, as the offseason was more about the players leaving than arriving.

ROSTER							2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: BILLY DONOVAN (5TH SEASON; CAREER: 399-319)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
8	Zach LaVine	G	6-5	200	3/10/95	UCLA	10	25	34.9	.452	.349	.854	5.2	3.9	19.5		7.1	5.4	26.8
0	Coby White	G	6-5	195	2/16/00	North Carolina	5	79	36.5	.447	.376	.838	4.5	5.1	19.1		6.0	6.7	25.1
9	Nikola Vučević	C	6-10	260	10/24/90	USC	13	76	34.3	.484	.294	.822	10.5	3.3	18.0		14.7	4.7	25.2
3	Josh Giddey	G	6-8	216	10/10/02	NBA Global Academy	3	80	25.1	.475	.337	.806	6.4	4.8	12.3		12.3	9.2	23.5
12	Ayo Dosunmu	G	6-5	200	1/17/00	Illinois	3	76	29.1	.501	.403	.810	2.8	3.2	12.2		4.7	5.3	20.0
44	Patrick Williams	F	6-7	215	8/26/01	Florida State	4	43	27.3	.443	.399	.788	3.9	1.5	10.0		6.8	2.7	17.5
25	Jalen Smith	F/C	6-9	215	3/16/00	Maryland	4	61	17.2	.592	.424	.692	5.5	1.0	9.9		15.5	2.9	27.6
13	Torrey Craig	F	6-5	221	12/19/90	South Carolina Upstate	7	53	19.8	.430	.392	.750	4.1	1.1	5.7		9.9	2.7	13.9
5	Jevon Carter	G	6-1	200	9/14/95	West Virginia	6	72	13.9	.378	.329	.571	0.8	1.3	5.0		2.9	4.5	17.1
21	Adama Sanogo	F	6-9	245	2/12/02	Connecticut	1	9	7.3	.519	.000	.667	4.0	0.0	4.0		26.3	0.0	26.3
3	Chris Duarte	G	6-5	190	6/13/97	Oregon	3	59	12.2	.381	.346	.788	1.8	0.7	3.9		7.1	2.9	15.3
17	Onuralp Bitim	F	6-6	215	3/31/99	Bursaspor	1	23	11.7	.381	.273	.800	1.4	0.6	3.5		5.7	2.3	14.3
25	Dalen Terry	F	6-7	195	7/12/02	Arizona	2	59	11.5	.439	.230	.581	1.9	1.4	3.1		8.0	5.7	12.7
15	Julian Phillips	F	6-8	198	11/05/03	Tennessee	1	40	8.1	.416	.316	.684	0.9	0.3	2.2		5.4	1.9	13.2
2	Lonzo Ball	G	6-6	190	10/27/97	UCLA	5	Injured — Missed Season											
14	Matas Buzelis	F	6-10	209	10/13/04	G League Ignite		R — First NBA Season											
	Marcus Domask	G/F	6-6	215	6/09/00	Illinois		R — First NBA Season											
26	DJ Steward	G	6-2	162	10/02/01	Duke		R — First NBA Season											



ZACH LAVINE

league in defensive efficiency last season after being fifth the year before, but Donovan likely won't have a choice.

Where it gets cloudy is the depth behind Giddey, White and LaVine. Ayo Dosunmu is a definite key off the bench, showing some serious improvement in the second half of last season, and doing so on both ends of the floor. Before the All-Star break, the former second-round pick was barely scoring 10 points per game and playing fewer than 26 minutes per contest. Post-All-Star (with LaVine sidelined), the combo guard was getting 37.6 minutes and averaging 16.8 points per game while also showing his playmaking skills with 5.2 assists.

Then there's the wild card in all of this — Lonzo Ball, who last played an NBA game on Jan. 14, 2022. He's attempting to come back from a left knee procedure that no professional athlete has ever overcome. If he's successful, what would that do to the rotation? He wouldn't start because of uncertainty and minutes restrictions, but he could take valuable playing time away from Dosunmu and the mix of Dalen Terry and Julian Phillips.

FINAL ANALYSIS

At the end of the day, a majority of this team's issues fall on Karnišovas and his front office. The Bulls have made strides in choosing a path forward, but to pull this off successfully, Karnišovas needs to finish what he's started. Expect the Bulls to continue doing all they can to move off LaVine, let the young players go through the growing pains and finish at or below the 30-win plateau to make sure the Spurs can't touch that '25 first-round pick.

If Karnišovas can pull off all that — a big if considering the decisions made in recent years — this could be a quicker turnaround than expected. If Karnišovas can't do it, then the Bulls will stay firmly stuck in mediocrity, which remains NBA purgatory.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at New Orleans	8:00
Oct. 25	at Milwaukee	7:00
Oct. 26	Oklahoma City	8:00
Oct. 28	at Memphis	8:00
Oct. 30	Orlando	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 4	Utah	8:30
Nov. 6	at Dallas	8:30
Nov. 7	Minnesota	8:00
Nov. 9	at Atlanta	7:30
Nov. 11	Cleveland	8:00
Nov. 13	at New York	7:30
Nov. 15	at Cleveland	7:30
Nov. 17	Houston	7:00
Nov. 18	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 20	at Milwaukee	7:30
Nov. 22	Atlanta	8:00
Nov. 23	Memphis	8:00
Nov. 26	at Washington	7:00
Nov. 27	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 29	Boston	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	Brooklyn	8:00
Dec. 5	at San Antonio	8:00
Dec. 6	Indiana	8:00
Dec. 8	Philadelphia	1:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	at Boston	7:30
Dec. 21	Boston	8:00
Dec. 23	Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 26	at Atlanta	7:30
Dec. 28	Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 30	at Charlotte	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 4	New York	8:00
Jan. 6	San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 8	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 10	Washington	8:00
Jan. 12	Sacramento	3:30
Jan. 14	New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 15	Atlanta	8:00
Jan. 17	Charlotte	9:30
Jan. 19	at Portland	9:00
Jan. 21	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 23	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 25	Philadelphia	8:00
Jan. 27	Denver	8:00
Jan. 29	at Boston	7:30
Jan. 31	at Toronto	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at Detroit	3:00
Feb. 4	Miami	8:00
Feb. 5	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 8	Golden State	8:00
Feb. 11	Detroit	8:00

Feb. 12	Detroit	8:00
Feb. 20	at New York	7:30
Feb. 22	Phoenix	5:00
Feb. 24	at Philadelphia	7:00
Feb. 26	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Feb. 28	Toronto	8:00

MARCH

March 2	at Indiana	5:00
March 4	Cleveland	8:00
March 8	at Miami	8:00
March 10	Indiana	8:00
March 12	at Orlando	7:00
March 13	Brooklyn	8:00
March 15	at Houston	8:00
March 17	at Utah	9:00
March 19	at Phoenix	10:00
March 20	at Sacramento	10:00
March 22	at L.A. Lakers	8:00
March 24	at Denver	9:00
March 27	L.A. Lakers	8:00
March 29	Dallas	8:00
March 31	at Oklahoma City	8:00

APRIL

April 1	Toronto	8:00
April 4	Portland	8:00
April 6	at Charlotte	1:00
April 8	at Cleveland	7:00
April 9	Miami	8:00
April 11	Washington	8:00
April 13	at Philadelphia	1:00

All times Eastern



CLE CAVALIERS

By all accounts, the Cleveland Cavaliers are entering the season with the idea that familiarity can take you places. In other words, the lone major change comes not to the roster but rather in the form of new head coach Kenny Atkinson and his staff of assistants.

That's a big change — but the NBA is a players' league, and players are the overwhelming reason why a team wins or loses. It's pretty evident that the Cavaliers are staying the course with a belief that last year's players are good enough to win.

Who knows? Maybe they are. On the bright side, the team signed Donovan Mitchell, Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen to contract extensions, proving that the organization and its star players are, at the very least, committed to one another.

FRONTCOURT

Allen and Mobley form perhaps the best defensive frontcourt in the Eastern Conference and one of the top two or three in the league. It's their perceived clunkiness at the offensive end that has some skeptics wondering if they're a long-term fit. But Atkinson was hired primarily to bring out the most in Mobley, as the Cavs are hoping this is the year he finally emerges as an All-Star-level player. Defensively, again, he's already elite. Meanwhile, Allen is a double-double machine and doesn't need the ball — or even care if he gets it — to succeed. So it makes sense that Cleveland is marching on with both because any issues in their chemistry are minimal.

Max Strus serves as the starting small forward, even if he is built more like a shooting guard at 6-foot-5. No one on the roster plays with more determination and fire — as Strus is all business, all the time. That's all great, but the Cavs brought him to Cleveland with the idea that he will fill their need for knock-down perimeter shooting. He has made a career out of doing that once in a while, but not enough in the playoffs. All the Cavs can do is hope that suddenly changes. At worst, Strus is a battler.

The problem in the frontcourt is likely the bench. Forward Dean Wade is an outstanding defender and strong glue guy, but again, the Cavs need him to start hitting



JARRETT ALLEN

SCOUTING THE CAVS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I think it's interesting that they decided to run it back with the only major change being new head coach Kenny Atkinson. ... A big key will be if Darius Garland bounces back from a down year. If he gets off to a bad start, I could see them trading him. ... Donovan Mitchell signing that extension gives them some wiggle room. They can at least formulate a plan to build around him if keeping the current core backfires. ... A major factor will be if Atkinson can get the most out of Evan Mobley on offense. That's a big reason he got the job. This has to be the year for Mobley."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 19-46
DIVISION: 5TH

2020-21
Record: 22-50
DIVISION: 4TH

2021-22
Record: 44-38
DIVISION: 3RD

2022-23
Record: 51-31
DIVISION: 2ND

2023-24
Record: 48-34
DIVISION: 2ND

FROM LEFT: TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; WENDELL CRUZ-USA TODAY SPORTS



DONOVAN MITCHELL



BEYOND THE ARC

Dynamic duo Sam Merrill had a breakout run last season when Darius Garland went down with a broken jaw, with the Cavs winning 17 of 19 during a midseason stretch and Merrill getting plenty of minutes. What made his transition so easy? He credited at least part of the success to the fact it wasn't his first run with Donovan Mitchell. They played in pickup games together when Mitchell was with the Utah Jazz and Merrill was starring at nearby Utah State.

Coach 'em up Trade rumors surrounded Garland most of the offseason, but head coach Kenny Atkinson seemed to put those to rest at his introductory press conference. "The way I look at it is we have two All-Star guards," he said. "It's on the coaching staff to figure that out. You put that responsibility on yourself. And they have fit before. It's just finding the schemes that work best, finding the rotations." Atkinson also admitted that there's work to be done with Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen. "We've got that defensive anchor," he said of the Cavaliers' bigs. "(On offense) it's a little bit getting it figured out with the spacing."

Hot streak For the second time in his career, Mitchell recorded 180-plus points and 20-plus 3-pointers while shooting better than 50 percent during a five-game span in the playoffs. No other NBA player has done it even once.



perimeter shots on a regular basis. Fellow forward Georges Niang is equally inconsistent and not quite the defender he needs to be. As for a true backup center, forget it. The Cavs don't have one and will have to shore that up before the playoffs arrive.

BACKCOURT

It all begins and ends with Mitchell, as dynamic a scorer as you'll find. He plays incredibly hard, leads by example and is a positive force on the floor and in the locker room. As far as team culture, there isn't a better superstar in the league than Mitchell. The fact that he re-signed with a three-year max contract over the offseason gave the Cavs some breathing room and a pretty good idea of how to build from here.

For now, again, they are staying the course and sticking with point guard Darius Garland, who is coming off a downer of a year. While he had his moments, he was nothing like the player who was an All-Star just three years ago. Some of that had to do with injuries, the Cavs will tell you. More of it had to do with Garland just being out of sorts, others will suggest. Either way, Garland is getting another chance to make it work alongside Mitchell and find his rhythm. There are still lots of questions about whether the two are a fit. This is the year those questions must be answered.

Along with getting Mobley to another level, Garland may be Atkinson's biggest challenge. Can the Cavs win big with two smaller guards who need the ball playing next to each other?

Let's put it this way — they believe they can win with Mitchell. They aren't saying as much, but this is the year they must decide whether they can win with Garland, too.

Aside from those two, there's some pretty good depth and versatility at these spots. Caris LeVert could start for some teams. He is a likely candidate for Sixth Man of the Year and can play either backcourt position or even some small forward. It sometimes might be a wild ride when he has the ball, but he generally does a lot more good than harm. He is also a determined backcourt defender.

What we don't know at this moment is the status of restricted free agent Isaac Okoro, though he is widely expected to return. If that's the case, Okoro is the



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Pick

1. Jaylon Tyson
G, 6-6, 215, California
Tyson was the Cavaliers' lone draft pick (and their only offseason acquisition, for that matter), but they seem to believe he can make an immediate contribution after being selected with the 20th overall pick. And why not? Two players who have had their numbers retired by the franchise — Larry Nance Sr. and Zydrunas Ilgauskas — also were drafted at No. 20. As for Tyson specifically, Cleveland likes his size and swagger, as he displayed a penchant for playing on and off the ball with equal effectiveness at the Las Vegas Summer League.

110.2

That's how many points per game the Cavaliers allowed last season, which ranked them seventh best in the NBA in that defensive category. It's a big reason they were comfortable returning largely the same cast, particularly shot-alterers Jarrett Allen and Evan Mobley.

ROSTER							2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: KENNY ATKINSON (1ST SEASON; CAREER: 118-190)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
45	Donovan Mitchell	G	6-3	215	9/07/96	Louisville	7	55	35.3	.462	.368	.865	5.1	6.1	26.6		6.9	8.2	36.1
10	Darius Garland	G	6-1	192	1/26/00	Vanderbilt	5	57	33.3	.446	.371	.834	2.7	6.5	18.0		3.8	9.4	26.0
31	Jarrett Allen	C	6-9	243	4/21/98	Texas	7	77	31.7	.634	.000	.742	10.5	2.7	16.5		15.9	4.1	25.0
4	Evan Mobley	C	6-11	215	6/18/01	USC	3	50	30.6	.579	.373	.719	9.4	3.2	15.7		14.7	5.0	24.6
3	Caris LeVert	G	6-6	205	8/25/94	Michigan	8	68	28.8	.421	.325	.766	4.1	5.1	14.0		6.9	8.5	23.3
1	Max Strus	G/F	6-5	215	3/28/96	DePaul	5	70	32.0	.418	.351	.794	4.8	4.0	12.2		7.2	6.1	18.3
20	Georges Niang	F	6-7	230	6/17/93	Iowa State	8	82	22.3	.449	.376	.850	3.4	1.2	9.4		7.3	2.6	20.1
35	Isaac Okoro	F/G	6-5	225	1/26/01	Auburn	4	69	27.3	.490	.391	.679	3.0	1.9	9.4		5.3	3.4	16.5
5	Sam Merrill	G	6-4	205	5/15/96	Utah State	4	61	17.5	.402	.404	.929	2.0	1.8	8.0		5.4	4.8	21.8
9	Craig Porter Jr.	G	6-1	180	2/26/00	Wichita State	1	51	12.7	.509	.353	.732	2.1	2.3	5.6		8.1	8.7	21.1
32	Dean Wade	F/C	6-9	228	11/20/96	Kansas State	5	54	20.5	.414	.391	.769	4.0	0.8	5.4		9.4	1.9	12.6
21	Emoni Bates	F	6-8	170	1/28/04	Eastern Michigan	1	15	8.9	.306	.303	.250	0.9	0.7	2.7		5.1	3.6	14.8
2	Ty Jerome	G/F	6-5	195	7/08/97	Virginia	5	2	7.4	.500	.000	.000	0.5	1.5	2.0		3.2	9.7	13.0
	Jaylon Tyson	G/F	6-6	215	12/02/02	California		R — First NBA Season											



DARIUS GARLAND

team’s best perimeter defender (and sometimes even takes on opposing power forwards) and a strong finisher off the break. But the Cavs should give up on Okoro developing into the 3-and-D type they once hoped. The “3” part of that equation just isn’t there.

If by chance Okoro is gone, the Cavs may rely heavily on first-round pick Jaylon Tyson, selected at No. 20. Tyson showed some serious promise as both a playmaker and scorer at the Las Vegas Summer League, displaying the type of well-rounded game that Atkinson hopes is the calling card of this team. Specialists are fine, but Swiss Army knives are better, and that could result in some minutes for Tyson.

Speaking of specialists, the Cavaliers discovered a couple of good ones in Sam Merrill, who extends opposing defenses just by stepping on the court, and Craig Porter Jr., who proved to be an ultra-athletic setup man after going undrafted.

FINAL ANALYSIS

It hasn’t always been pretty, but the Cavs have taken steps forward in each of the past three seasons — from the play-in tournament to the first round to the Eastern Conference semifinals. So for all the questions about them doing little beyond changing the head coach, it’s hard to fault them for mostly staying the course.

They have some obvious needs, from consistent perimeter shooting to steady and even standout play from Garland and Mobley. If those things elude them, then they likely won’t get any further than they did last year, and they may not even get that far. But Atkinson will bring a new voice and a new system, and if those things result in a better flow offensively, the Cavs could be a sleeper in the East. They certainly have the talent; it’s all about bringing out the best in that talent.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Toronto	7:30
Oct. 25	Detroit	7:30
Oct. 26	at Washington	7:00
Oct. 28	at New York	7:30
Oct. 30	L.A. Lakers	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Orlando	7:00
Nov. 2	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 4	Milwaukee	7:00
Nov. 6	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 8	Golden State	7:30
Nov. 9	Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 11	at Chicago	8:00
Nov. 13	at Philadelphia	7:30
Nov. 15	Chicago	7:30
Nov. 17	Charlotte	6:00
Nov. 19	at Boston	7:00
Nov. 20	New Orleans	7:30
Nov. 24	Toronto	7:30
Nov. 27	Atlanta	7:00
Nov. 29	at Atlanta	2:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Boston	6:00
Dec. 3	Washington	7:00
Dec. 5	Denver	7:00
Dec. 7	at Charlotte	1:00
Dec. 8	at Miami	6:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16: Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games		
Dec. 20	Milwaukee	7:30
Dec. 21	Philadelphia	8:00
Dec. 23	Utah	7:00
Dec. 27	at Denver	9:00
Dec. 30	at Golden State	10:00
Dec. 31	at L.A. Lakers	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 3	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 5	Charlotte	6:00
Jan. 8	Oklahoma City	7:00
Jan. 9	Toronto	7:00
Jan. 12	Indiana	6:00
Jan. 14	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 16	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 18	at Minnesota	9:00
Jan. 20	Phoenix	3:30
Jan. 22	at Houston	8:00
Jan. 24	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 25	Houston	7:30
Jan. 27	Detroit	7:00
Jan. 29	at Miami	7:30
Jan. 30	Atlanta	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	Dallas	3:30
Feb. 4	Boston	7:00
Feb. 5	at Detroit	7:00
Feb. 7	at Washington	7:00
Feb. 10	Minnesota	7:00
Feb. 12	at Toronto	7:30

Feb. 20	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 21	New York	7:00
Feb. 23	Memphis	7:30
Feb. 25	at Orlando	7:30
Feb. 28	at Boston	7:30

MARCH

March 2	Portland	3:30
March 4	at Chicago	8:00
March 5	Miami	7:00
March 7	at Charlotte	7:00
March 9	at Milwaukee	8:00
March 11	Brooklyn	7:00
March 14	at Memphis	8:00
March 16	Orlando	6:00
March 18	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 19	at Sacramento	10:00
March 21	at Phoenix	10:00
March 23	at Utah	3:30
March 25	at Portland	10:00
March 27	San Antonio	7:00
March 28	at Detroit	7:00
March 30	L.A. Clippers	3:30

APRIL

April 2	New York	7:00
April 4	at San Antonio	8:00
April 6	Sacramento	6:00
April 8	Chicago	7:00
April 10	at Indiana	7:00
April 11	at New York	7:30
April 13	Indiana	1:00

All times Eastern



DET PISTONS



JADEN IVEY

SCOUTING THE PISTONS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

“Trajan Langdon has really hit the ground running and set them up nicely. ... If nothing else, I can guarantee you they won’t lose 28 straight again. ... I think J.B. Bickerstaff was a great hire. Bickerstaff showed in Cleveland he can develop a fairly young roster and get it to take the natural steps. ... They signed Cade Cunningham to an extension and surrounded him with some vets to make him glad they did. Tobias Harris, Malik Beasley, Tim Hardaway Jr. and Paul Reed aren’t going to lead them to the playoffs, but suddenly, the Pistons are interesting and watchable.”

It’s a new day in Detroit. And considering that the Pistons lost 28 consecutive games over one stretch last season, that should be considered a good thing. But it’s true that the Pistons are loaded with newness — from head of basketball operations Trajan Langdon to head coach J.B. Bickerstaff to veterans such as forward Tobias Harris, shooting guard Malik Beasley and wing Tim Hardaway Jr. All of it is the organization’s way of saying it is tired of losing, or at least losing by a lot, all the time. With former No. 1 overall pick and franchise face Cade Cunningham signing a contract extension this offseason, the Pistons may be on their way — maybe not yet to great things, but at least to not being a laughingstock.

FRONTCOURT

Harris is a former Piston who returns after regular runs in the playoffs with Philadelphia. He’s always been a pro’s pro, and Bickerstaff already has gushed about what Harris will bring. Namely, Harris will serve as a grownup in the locker room, a calming presence when things get challenging and a vet who can help Detroit win some games. Is he an All-Star? Hardly. But all things considered, he could be the Pistons’ MVP.

Part of Harris’ job will be to lead by example and help the younger bigs develop. That list includes starting center Jalen Duren, who made some nice strides in year two by averaging a double-double (13.8 ppg, 11.6 rpg). Detroit is banking on continued improvement.

Meanwhile, Isaiah Stewart is likely to come off the bench behind Harris and Duren, and if you’re the Pistons, you could do a lot worse. Stewart is entering his fifth year and remains a rough-and-tumble guy who is willing to do the dirty work underneath. The key is keeping him healthy, as he appeared in just 46 games last season and 50 the year before that.

Small forward is still a work in progress, with second-year man Ausar Thompson likely to start and rookie Ronald Holland II (the No. 5 overall pick) serving as the primary backup. Thompson showed promise near the basket, finding ways to score and contribute in a fairly promising rookie season. That said, any shot beyond 12 feet

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 20-46
DIVISION: 4TH

2020-21
Record: 20-52
DIVISION: 5TH

2021-22
Record: 23-59
DIVISION: 5TH

2022-23
Record: 17-65
DIVISION: 5TH

2023-24
Record: 14-68
DIVISION: 5TH

FROM LEFT: RICK OSENTOSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; REGGIE HILDRED-USA TODAY SPORTS



CADE CUNNINGHAM



BEYOND THE ARC

Back in the game J.B. Bickerstaff went on the “Road Trippin’” podcast with former NBA forward Richard Jefferson and admitted he initially assumed he would be sitting out the season. Then Pistons head of basketball operations Trajan Langdon called. “I hadn’t planned on getting back in as quickly as I did because there were no jobs open,” Bickerstaff said. “But as soon as Trajan reached out, like the conversations I had with him, it just put me in a place where I thought, I was just confident he was going to be able to lead us and help build something that’s going to be special.”

Veteran enthusiasm The addition of Tobias Harris brought out particular excitement in Bickerstaff. “I think Tobias was the perfect piece for us,” Bickerstaff said. “To be able to get him right out of the gate in free agency was huge for us. ... Because he’s such a high-quality character person, when he uses his voice in tough times, people are going to be more willing to listen.”

Long road to here The Pistons are one of the NBA’s oldest franchises, starting as the Fort Wayne Zollnar Pistons in 1941 as a member of the old National Basketball League. They actually won two championships in that league (1944 and ‘45) before relocating to Detroit in 1957. Since then, they’ve won three NBA titles — 1989, 1990 and 2004.





JALEN DUREN

is a well-traveled jump shooter with lots of playoff experience — as the Pistons are his sixth team in nine seasons. But he has 37 games of postseason experience, including two starts with the Bucks last year. At the very least, he will help spread opposing defenses when Bickerstaff feels there’s a need.

Second-year guard Marcus Sasser was a pleasant surprise as a rookie, appearing in 71 games and shooting 42.8 percent from the field (including 37.5 percent on 3-pointers) on his way to 8.3 points per game. He’ll be a good fit in the Pistons’ quest to develop and improve.

Hardaway also could see some time at shooting guard, again, depending on matchups.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Things should be better. That’s really the bottom line here — building and evolving. And many believe the Pistons found the right people to run things and eventually get the franchise where it wants to go in Langdon, Bickerstaff and the veteran additions who can help Detroit survive some rocky times along the way.

For starters, Bickerstaff arrives after five-plus years in Cleveland, where he proved to be the ideal coach for these situations. In his final three seasons, the Cavaliers went from the play-in tournament to the first round of the playoffs to the conference semifinals. But that improvement followed two years of taking some lumps, and that is where the Pistons likely are today.

Unlike last year, though, they can roll out a veteran lineup with Cunningham — such as Harris, Beasley, Hardaway and Reed — to keep things from spinning out of control.

So 28 straight losses? Yeah, that’s ancient history. Detroit undoubtedly will be better this season while still keeping an eye toward the future.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Indiana	7:00
Oct. 25	at Cleveland	7:30
Oct. 26	Boston	7:00
Oct. 28	at Miami	7:30
Oct. 30	at Philadelphia	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	New York	7:00
Nov. 3	at Brooklyn	3:30
Nov. 4	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Nov. 6	at Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 8	Atlanta	7:00
Nov. 10	Houston	3:00
Nov. 12	Miami	7:00
Nov. 13	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 15	at Toronto	7:00
Nov. 17	at Washington	6:00
Nov. 18	Chicago	7:00
Nov. 21	at Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 23	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 25	Toronto	7:00
Nov. 27	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 29	at Indiana	8:00
Nov. 30	Philadelphia	7:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 3	Milwaukee	7:00
Dec. 4	at Boston	7:30
Dec. 7	at New York	7:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16: Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games		
Dec. 19	Utah	7:00
Dec. 21	at Phoenix	9:00
Dec. 23	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Dec. 26	at Sacramento	10:00
Dec. 28	at Denver	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Orlando	7:00
Jan. 3	Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 4	Minnesota	7:00
Jan. 6	Portland	7:00
Jan. 8	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 9	Golden State	7:00
Jan. 11	Toronto	7:00
Jan. 13	at New York	7:30
Jan. 16	Indiana	7:00
Jan. 18	Phoenix	5:00
Jan. 20	at Houston	2:00
Jan. 22	at Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 25	at Orlando	7:00
Jan. 27	at Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 29	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 31	Dallas	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	Chicago	3:00
Feb. 3	Atlanta	7:00
Feb. 5	Cleveland	7:00
Feb. 7	Philadelphia	7:30
Feb. 9	Charlotte	1:00
Feb. 11	at Chicago	8:00

Feb. 12	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 21	at San Antonio	8:30
Feb. 23	at Atlanta	6:00
Feb. 24	L.A. Clippers	7:00
Feb. 26	Boston	7:00
Feb. 28	Denver	7:00

MARCH

March 1	Brooklyn	7:00
March 3	at Utah	9:30
March 5	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 8	at Golden State	8:30
March 9	at Portland	9:00
March 11	Washington	7:00
March 13	Washington	7:00
March 15	Oklahoma City	7:00
March 17	at New Orleans	8:00
March 19	at Miami	7:30
March 21	at Dallas	8:30
March 23	New Orleans	3:00
March 25	San Antonio	7:00
March 28	Cleveland	7:00
March 30	at Minnesota	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at Oklahoma City	8:00
April 4	at Toronto	7:30
April 5	Memphis	7:00
April 7	Sacramento	7:00
April 10	New York	7:00
April 11	Milwaukee	7:00
April 13	at Milwaukee	1:00

All times Eastern



CENTRAL DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

IND PACERS

Immediately after the Indiana Pacers were eliminated by the Boston Celtics in the Eastern Conference finals, they were aware of the likelihood that their playoff run would be treated as a fluke driven by opponents' injuries. Immediately, they used that perceived slight as motivation.

"I'm really excited to go into this next year with, 'The Pacers made the Eastern Conference finals. Can they do it again? They probably can't. They're this. They're that,'" All-Star point guard Tyrese Haliburton said. "That's exciting for our group."

Other teams drew more attention with their offseason moves. Still, the Pacers maintain the core of a hyper-potent offense that led the NBA in scoring, field goal percentage and assists and finished second in offensive efficiency. They also enter this season with the experience of having been the first Indiana team since 2013-14 to win a playoff series.

FRONT COURT

The Pacers' decision to trade for Pascal Siakam in January signaled their intention to not just make the playoffs but also be a factor in them, and the move paid off as well as they could have imagined.

Siakam fits in seamlessly with their up-tempo transition attack, as he can run with Haliburton, but he's also their best option when the game slows down and they're forced to attack in the half court in isolation scenarios. The two-time All-NBA pick led the Pacers with 21.3 points per game in a half-season with the team and then led them in playoff scoring with 21.6 points per game. In the offseason, the Pacers went all in to make sure Siakam stuck around and signed him to a four-year, \$189 million deal.

He pairs well with center Myles Turner, as each can space the floor when the other serves as a ball-screen partner with Haliburton. Turner keeps improving on his ability to score at all three levels, and although he's not as efficient a shot blocker as he once was, he still averaged 1.9 per game last season.

The Pacers have two high-flying rim runners as backups at the 4 and the 5. Few forwards run the floor as well as Obi Toppin, and that gets him lots of dunks and fast-break layups in the Pacers' system. In his first season with the



PASCAL SIAKAM

SCOUTING THE PACERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"A lot of people outside Indiana have already forgotten they advanced to the Eastern Conference finals. But they're for real. ... Aside from Tyrese Haliburton and Pascal Siakam, nothing about them really stands out. They really play for each other and play as a team, and Rick Carlisle deserves a lot of credit for that. ... They'll have to defend better if they want to get anywhere special, though. Last year, they just tried to outscore people and for the most part, it worked. But that will only take you so far. ... I like how they play with a ton of confidence. They have some real swagger."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 45-28
DIVISION: 2ND

2020-21
Record: 34-38
DIVISION: 2ND

2021-22
Record: 25-57
DIVISION: 4TH

2022-23
Record: 35-47
DIVISION: 4TH

2023-24
Record: 47-35
DIVISION: 3RD

FROM LEFT: TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; BRAD PENNER-USA TODAY SPORTS



TYRESE HALIBURTON



BEYOND THE ARC

Heel turn Tyrese Haliburton's rise to All-Star status has helped him make connections at World Wrestling Entertainment. He generally gets backstage passes to mingle with famous wrestlers whenever the circuit comes through Indianapolis, and this summer he got to step into the ring during an episode of WWE Smackdown at Madison Square Garden. He didn't engage in a match, but he and New York Knicks guard Jalen Brunson involved themselves on opposite sides of a match involving Logan Paul and LA Knight, with Haliburton threatening Brunson with brass knuckles and Brunson responding with a steel chair.

Legomania Myles Turner was asked during the in-season tournament if he still "plays with Legos." He responded by saying, "I don't play with Legos; I build Legos." Turner builds large, intricate pieces in his spare time. Among his summer projects was a 10,000-piece Lego model of the Eiffel Tower with the peak coming up to the 6-foot-11 center's chest.

Bennedict the baker Bennedict Mathurin has been learning how to bake. When he tore his labrum in March, he had a lot of time on his hands. So he made a point to bring baked goods on road trips. His cupcakes and cookies were well received, he said, but he was particularly proud of his cinnamon rolls.



Pacers, he averaged 10.3 points, made 70.6 percent of his 2-point shots and 40.3 percent of his 3s, earning a four-year, \$60 million extension.

Isaiah Jackson spent most of the season in a battle with Jalen Smith for the backup center job but got the bulk of the minutes off the bench in the playoffs. He shot 66.5 percent from the floor and averaged 17.9 points and 11.1 rebounds per 36 minutes. Smith signed with the Bulls, so the Pacers replaced him with James Wiseman, the former No. 2 overall pick who has struggled to find a foothold in the league.

Jarace Walker, the No. 8 overall pick in the 2023 draft, played in just 33 games with the Pacers as a rookie, but they liked what they saw from him in limited action and in G League games. He doesn't have a clear path to playing time, but they could use him at either small or power forward.

The Pacers didn't have a first-round pick but acquired the draft rights to 6-foot-9 wing Johnny Furphy, whom the San Antonio Spurs selected at No. 35 overall. Indiana likes his shooting range and ability to move without the ball.

BACKCOURT

The Pacers' point guard depth is the envy of the league, and their starter is arguably the best perimeter passer in basketball. Haliburton struggled with injuries and the intense focus of opposing defenses last season, and he went through an extended shooting slump, but he still earned third-team All-NBA honors and led the league with 10.9 assists per game. His strong post-season ended with his second injury to his left hamstring, but a summer to heal should help him to get back to his previous form with lessons learned for how to deal with double-teams and constant on-ball pressure.

The playoffs showed just how fortunate the Pacers are to have combo guard Andrew Nembhard to share the starting backcourt with Haliburton or start in his stead with veteran T.J. McConnell functioning as the backup point guard. Nembhard averaged 14.9 points per game in the playoffs and stood out for Canada at the Paris Olympics, showing more aggression on offense and maintaining

58.4

Defense was a struggle for the Pacers all season, and perhaps the ugliest number on their stat sheet was the league-worst 58.4 points per game they allowed in the paint. As good as the Pacers are on offense, they have to get drastically better at keeping the ball away from the rim.



OFFSEASON MOVES

- Draft picks
- 2. Johnny Furphy SF 6-9, 200, Kansas
 - 2. Tristen Newton PG 6-5 190 UConn
 - 2. Enrique Freeman F, 6-7, 206, Akron

The Pacers traded up for Furphy because of his outside shooting and ability to move without the ball. Newton can handle and defend any position 1-3. Freeman led Division I in rebounding. He provides organizational depth.

Other Newcomers
The Pacers needed a third center when Jalen Smith opted out, and James Wiseman gives them one. Cole Swider is long and athletic and can shoot from distance.

ROSTER																48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY					
HEAD COACH: RICK CARLISLE (8TH SEASON; CAREER: 943-828)																2023-24 STATISTICS					
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS		
43	Pascal Siakam	F	6-8	245	4/02/94	New Mexico State	8	80	33.2	.536	.346	.732	7.1	4.3	21.7		10.2	6.2	31.4		
0	Tyrese Haliburton	G	6-5	185	2/29/00	Iowa State	4	69	32.2	.477	.364	.855	3.9	10.9	20.1		5.9	16.2	30.0		
33	Myles Turner	C/F	6-11	250	3/24/96	Texas	9	77	27.0	.524	.358	.773	6.9	1.3	17.1		12.3	2.3	30.4		
00	Benedict Mathurin	G/F	6-5	210	6/19/02	Arizona	2	59	26.1	.446	.374	.821	4.0	2.0	14.5		7.3	3.7	26.7		
23	Aaron Nesmith	G/F	6-6	215	10/16/99	Vanderbilt	4	72	27.7	.496	.419	.781	3.8	1.5	12.2		6.6	2.6	21.1		
1	Obi Toppin	F	6-9	220	3/04/98	Dayton	4	82	21.1	.573	.403	.770	3.9	1.6	10.3		8.9	3.6	23.4		
9	T.J. McConnell	G	6-1	190	3/25/92	Arizona	9	71	18.2	.556	.409	.790	2.7	5.5	10.2		7.1	14.5	27.0		
2	Andrew Nembhard	G/F	6-4	191	1/16/00	Gonzaga	2	68	25.0	.498	.357	.804	2.1	4.1	9.2		4.0	7.9	17.7		
13	James Wiseman	C	6-11	240	3/31/01	Memphis	3	63	17.3	.613	.000	.706	5.3	0.9	7.1		14.8	2.4	19.6		
22	Isaiah Jackson	F	6-9	205	1/10/02	Kentucky	3	60	12.8	.665	.000	.716	4.0	0.8	6.4		14.8	3.1	23.8		
26	Ben Sheppard	G	6-6	190	7/16/01	Belmont	1	57	14.3	.393	.314	.885	1.6	0.9	4.4		5.2	3.1	14.9		
5	Jarace Walker	F	6-7	235	9/04/03	Houston	1	33	10.3	.409	.400	.889	1.9	1.2	3.6		8.9	5.6	16.9		
	Cole Swider	F	6-8	220	5/08/99	Syracuse	2	18	4.8	.395	.333	1.000	0.4	0.3	2.3		3.9	2.8	23.2		
10	Kendall Brown	G	6-7	205	5/11/03	Baylor	2	15	4.2	.533	.000	.625	0.3	0.3	1.4		3.8	3.8	16.1		
16	James Johnson	F	6-7	240	2/20/87	Wake Forest	15	9	5.2	.300	.000	1.000	0.4	0.9	0.9		4.1	8.1	8.1		
29	Quenton Jackson	G	6-5	173	9/15/98	Texas A&M	2	3	3.5	.000	.000	1.000	1.3	0.7	0.7		18.2	9.1	9.1		
8	Enrique Freeman	F	6-7	206	7/29/00	Akron		R — First NBA Season													
12	Johnny Furphy	G	6-9	200	12/08/04	Kansas		R — First NBA Season													
4	Tristen Newton	G	6-5	190	4/26/01	Connecticut		R — First NBA Season													



BENNEDICT MATHURIN

his tenacity on the defensive end. McConnell is playing his best basketball at age 32, and his scoring rose to a career high last season even though his minutes dropped; he averaged more than 20 points and 10 assists per 36 minutes and led all bench players in total points in the playoffs.

The Pacers also have talent and depth on the wings. Aaron Nesmith can handle every position from 2 to 4, but the 3 is his most natural spot. Nesmith and Nembhard take on the top two perimeter defensive assignments, and Nesmith has made strides in his ability to defend without fouling. He also had his best offensive season, making 41.9 percent of his 3-pointers.

Bennedict Mathurin saw a slight numbers dip after earning first-team All-Rookie honors, but he was actually more efficient in Year 2 as he worked on getting his exceptional one-on-one scoring skills to fit into the Pacers' broader uptempo plans. He missed the last month of the season and the playoffs with a torn labrum but can add scoring punch when he returns healthy.

Ben Sheppard found it easy to fit into the system as a rookie; he proved he could defend top perimeter players and hit open 3-pointers, which earned him rotation minutes at the 2 and the 3 and even two starts in the playoffs when Haliburton was hurt. He will likely maintain a starting spot this season.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Pacers may not have made any major offseason additions, but they've retained their most important pieces from last year's run. There's every reason to believe that the Pacers will be able to play just as fast and score as prolifically as they did last season. They desperately need to improve on defense after finishing 24th in defensive rating, but their offensive potency should be enough to get them back to the playoffs and give them a puncher's chance to beat anyone they meet there.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Detroit	7:00
Oct. 25	at New York	7:30
Oct. 27	Philadelphia	3:30
Oct. 28	at Orlando	7:00
Oct. 30	Boston	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 4	at Dallas	9:45
Nov. 6	Orlando	7:00
Nov. 8	at Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 10	New York	5:00
Nov. 13	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 15	Miami	7:00
Nov. 17	Miami	5:00
Nov. 18	at Toronto	7:30
Nov. 20	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 22	at Milwaukee	7:30
Nov. 24	Washington	5:00
Nov. 25	New Orleans	7:00
Nov. 27	Portland	7:00
Nov. 29	Detroit	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Memphis	3:30
Dec. 3	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 4	at Brooklyn	7:30
Dec. 6	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 8	Charlotte	5:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16: Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games		
Dec. 19	at Phoenix	9:00
Dec. 22	at Sacramento	6:00
Dec. 23	at Golden State	10:00
Dec. 26	Oklahoma City	7:00
Dec. 27	at Boston	7:30
Dec. 29	at Boston	6:00
Dec. 31	Milwaukee	3:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at Miami	7:30
Jan. 4	Phoenix	7:00
Jan. 6	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 8	Chicago	7:00
Jan. 10	Golden State	7:00
Jan. 12	at Cleveland	6:00
Jan. 14	Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 16	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 18	Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 23	San Antonio	2:00
Jan. 25	at San Antonio	12:00
Jan. 29	Detroit	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Atlanta	5:00
Feb. 3	at Utah	9:00
Feb. 4	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 6	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Feb. 8	at L.A. Lakers	4:00
Feb. 11	New York	7:30
Feb. 12	at Washington	7:00

Feb. 20	Memphis	7:00
Feb. 23	L.A. Clippers	5:00
Feb. 24	Denver	7:00
Feb. 26	Toronto	7:00
Feb. 28	at Miami	8:00

MARCH

March 2	Chicago	5:00
March 4	Houston	7:00
March 6	at Atlanta	7:30
March 8	at Atlanta	7:30
March 10	at Chicago	8:00
March 11	Milwaukee	7:00
March 14	at Philadelphia	7:00
March 15	at Milwaukee	8:00
March 17	at Minnesota	8:00
March 19	Dallas	7:00
March 20	Brooklyn	7:00
March 22	Brooklyn	5:00
March 24	Minnesota	7:00
March 26	L.A. Lakers	7:30
March 27	at Washington	7:00
March 29	at Oklahoma City	8:00
March 31	Sacramento	7:00

APRIL

April 2	Charlotte	7:00
April 4	Utah	7:00
April 6	at Denver	8:00
April 10	Cleveland	7:00
April 11	Orlando	7:00
April 13	at Cleveland	1:00

All times Eastern



CENTRAL DIVISION PREDICTION: **1st**

MIL BUCKS

The Milwaukee Bucks enter this season looking to recapture the championship form that brought the team its first NBA crown in 50 years during the 2020-21 season. Despite maintaining championship-caliber talent ever since, led by franchise cornerstone and two-time MVP Gi-

annis Antetokounmpo and sharp-shooting Damian Lillard, an eight-time All-Star who enters his second season with the team, the Bucks are gearing up to make a long playoff run after stunning first-round exits the past two seasons.

This will be the first full season under the direction of Doc Rivers, who took over after the surprising midseason firing of first-year head coach Adrian Griffin. Rivers has re-vamped his coaching staff, most notably with the addition of top assistant Darvin Ham, who returns to Milwaukee after serving as head coach of the Los Angeles Lakers the previous two seasons.

Injuries to key players have stymied the Bucks' efforts at another title run over the past three seasons. The usually indestructible Antetokounmpo sat out the playoffs with a left calf strain. Fortunately, the Greek Freak made a full recovery and led Greece to the knockout round in the Summer Olympics in Paris. Small forward Khris Middleton, a 12-year veteran, had offseason arthroscopic surgery on both ankles. Injuries limited the 33-year-old to 55 games last season and 33 contests in 2022-23. Lillard, who was limited to 58 games in 2022-23 and 29 the previous season while a member of the Portland Trail Blazers, played in 73 games during his first season in Milwaukee but also missed time in the playoffs due to injury.

Key free-agent signings upgraded Milwaukee's lineup and will provide added depth, a key factor considering the Bucks drafted two talented teenagers — AJ Johnson and Tyler Smith — as longer-term options.

FRONT COURT

The offense will again rely heavily on Antetokounmpo, and why not? He finished second in the league in scoring last season at 30.4 points per game on 61.1 percent shooting from the field in 73 regular-season games. Aside from the injury that sidelined him for the playoffs, Antetokounmpo, who will turn 30 in December, has shown no signs of slow-



DAMIAN LILLARD

SCOUTING THE BUCKS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"It may not sound like much, but they really made some upgrades by replacing Malik Beasley with Gary Trent Jr. and Jae Crowder with Taurean Prince. ... Patrick Beverley was no great loss. He didn't fit the culture. Delon Wright is much better for them. ... Damian Lillard is on the backside of his career. A big key for them is if he can stay healthy and consistent. Can he be the second star next to Giannis Antetokounmpo? ... Doc Rivers takes a lot of flak, but he actually is a pretty good coach. I think a full year of him will prove that. ... As long as Antetokounmpo is healthy, they're contenders."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 56-17
DIVISION: 1st

2020-21
Record: 46-26
DIVISION: 1st

2021-22
Record: 51-31
DIVISION: 1st

2022-23
Record: 58-24
DIVISION: 1st

2023-24
Record: 49-33
DIVISION: 1st

FROM LEFT: TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; MICHAEL MCLOONE-USA TODAY SPORTS



GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO



BEYOND THE ARC

Dynamic duo Giannis Antetokounmpo and Khris Middleton will begin their 12th season as Bucks teammates. After struggling to a 15-67 record in their first season together, the pair has helped transform the Bucks into one of the league's consistently elite teams over the past six seasons.

Developing story Pat Connaughton, who is set to begin his seventh season with the Bucks, continues to make financial investments in the Milwaukee community. Three Leaf Partners, a real estate group co-founded by Connaughton, recently bought a church in the Milwaukee suburb of Wauwatosa that it plans to transform into an upscale apartment complex. The firm already has developed multi-family apartments and townhomes in the area.

Perennial playoffs Milwaukee has made the playoffs in eight consecutive seasons after making the postseason just three times in a 10-year period prior to the current streak.

Final five Five players — Giannis Antetokounmpo, Khris Middleton, Brook Lopez, Bobby Portis and Pat Connaughton — remain on the roster from the 2020-21 squad that captured the NBA crown, the franchise's first since 1971 when Hall of Famers Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and Oscar Robertson helped lead the Bucks to their first title.



ing down and continues to perform at an MVP-caliber level while remaining laser-focused on getting his team into position for another title run.

Rock-steady Brook Lopez, who at 36 is entering his 17th season, holds down the starting center spot. Lopez’s age is a concern, but he proved his durability by starting 79 games last season. When healthy, Middleton has shown he still has game-changing abilities from the wing position. With Antetokounmpo out and Lillard limited with injuries, Middleton performed at a high level in the Bucks’ brief postseason stint last season. Bobby Portis, consistently one of the league’s top sixth men, again will provide a spark off the bench and log significant minutes as a backup big with hustle and physical play.

The addition of power forward Taurean Prince through free agency is valuable. Although he’s not regarded as an elite defender, Prince’s length and versatility provide an upgrade for the team’s defensive scheme, and his ability to knock down the 3-point shot will add offensive firepower. A deep reserve of wing players will be competing for time, led by veteran Pat Connaughton and improving AJ Green, who provides an explosive long-range shooting option. Andre Jackson Jr., who saw action in 57 games as a rookie, could also be in the mix but might find it more difficult to get on the court due to the upgraded roster.

BACKCOURT

The Bucks were convinced that Lillard would be the key piece in positioning the team to battle for another NBA championship, but his first year in Milwaukee didn’t go quite as planned. Traded to Milwaukee late last offseason, Lillard seemed uncomfortable at first in adapting to his new teammates and city while also dealing with a personal matter and an unexpected coaching change. Lillard, who simply needs to perform better than last season, no doubt is motivated to win his first NBA championship, which would add to his potential Hall of Fame résumé. He remains the lone true point guard on the roster, although Antetokounmpo and Middleton also handle that duty at times.

.758

The Bucks have enjoyed a substantial home court advantage since the opening of Fiserv Forum for the 2018-19 season, compiling a 179-57 record and .758 winning percentage, including a 31-11 record last season. The success at home offset the team’s struggles on the road, where they went 18-22 during the 2023-24 campaign.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

- 1. AJ Johnson
PG, 6-5, 160, Illawarra (National Basketball League/Australia)
- 2. Tyler Smith
F, 6-11, 224, G League Ignite
Neither Johnson nor Smith, a pair of raw 19-year-olds, is expected to have much, if any, on-court impact this season as the Bucks bank on their long-term potential.

Other Newcomers

Milwaukee made its mark in free agency, most notably with the signing of shooting guard **Gary Trent Jr.**, who is almost certain to start. Veterans Delon Wright and Taurean Prince, who provide much-needed defensive versatility, should see significant minutes off the bench.

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE		
HEAD COACH: DOC RIVERS (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 1,114-782)																	PRODUCTIVITY		
2023-24 STATISTICS																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
34	Giannis Antetokounmpo	F	6-11	243	12/06/94	Filathlitikos	11	73	35.2	.611	.274	.657	11.5	6.5	30.4		15.7	8.9	41.5
0	Damian Lillard	G	6-2	195	7/15/90	Weber State	12	73	35.3	.424	.354	.920	4.4	7.0	24.3		6.0	9.5	33.0
22	Khris Middleton	F	6-7	222	8/12/91	Texas A&M	12	55	27.0	.493	.381	.833	4.7	5.3	15.1		8.3	9.4	26.7
9	Bobby Portis	F	6-10	250	2/10/95	Arkansas	9	82	24.5	.508	.407	.790	7.4	1.3	13.8		14.5	2.5	27.0
33	Gary Trent Jr.	G	6-5	204	1/18/99	Duke	6	71	28.1	.426	.393	.771	2.6	1.7	13.7		4.5	2.9	23.5
11	Brook Lopez	C	7-1	282	4/01/88	Stanford	16	79	30.5	.485	.366	.821	5.2	1.6	12.5		8.1	2.5	19.7
12	Taurean Prince	F	6-6	218	3/22/94	Baylor	8	78	27.0	.442	.396	.735	2.9	1.5	8.9		5.2	2.7	15.9
24	Pat Connaughton	G	6-5	209	1/06/93	Notre Dame	9	76	22.1	.435	.345	.759	3.1	2.1	5.6		6.8	4.6	12.3
17	Stanley Umude	G	6-6	210	4/12/99	Arkansas	2	24	12.8	.440	.453	.906	2.1	0.5	5.3		8.0	1.7	19.8
4	Delon Wright	G	6-5	185	4/26/92	Utah	9	47	15.8	.394	.368	.822	1.8	2.5	4.5		5.6	7.7	13.6
20	AJ Green	G	6-4	190	9/27/99	Northern Iowa	2	56	11.0	.423	.408	.895	1.1	0.5	4.5		5.0	2.3	19.7
3	MarJon Beauchamp	F	6-7	199	10/12/00	G League Ignite	2	48	12.7	.488	.400	.679	2.1	0.6	4.4		7.8	2.4	16.7
55	Ryan Rollins	G	6-3	180	7/03/02	Toledo	2	13	6.0	.519	.750	.765	1.0	1.1	3.4		8.0	8.6	27.1
44	Andre Jackson Jr.	G	6-6	209	11/13/01	Connecticut	1	57	10.0	.500	.370	.727	2.0	0.9	2.2		9.5	4.2	10.5
7	Chris Livingston	F	6-6	220	10/15/03	Kentucky	1	21	4.3	.500	.200	.750	1.0	0.2	1.2		11.1	2.7	13.8
	Anžejs Pasečņiks	C	7-1	229	12/20/95	Gran Canaria	2	Did Not Play In NBA											
77	AJ Johnson	G	6-5	160	12/01/04	Illawarra		R — First NBA Season											
15	Tyler Smith	F	6-11	224	11/02/04	G League Ignite		R — First NBA Season											



KHRIS MIDDLETON

The Bucks made a surprising splash in free agency with the signing of 25-year-old combo guard Gary Trent Jr. to a veteran minimum contract, a coup considering the team was subject to roster restrictions because its payroll for the 2023-24 season was over the second apron of the luxury tax threshold. Trent will start alongside Lillard in the backcourt and will inject some young blood into a team that relies heavily on aging veterans. Although Trent doesn't provide an upgrade on defense, he does add another offensive dimension with his 3-point shooting.

The Bucks also landed veteran Delon Wright, who will be playing for his ninth team in 10 years. Wright will serve in a key backup role in spelling Lillard and provide a much-needed boost on defense from the team's guards.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Antetokounmpo and Lillard are certain to have much better on-court chemistry this season. Lillard's outside shooting prowess and the indomitable inside force that Antetokounmpo provides will present defensive nightmares for opponents.

The injury-plagued Middleton's health will be a key factor. If he can remain on the court, he's proved he still has the skill to compete at a top level. Lopez, although in the twilight of his career, provides competitive consistency at center and remains a key rim protector, along with Antetokounmpo, as the Bucks strive to return to being an elite defensive team.

With a host of important roster additions, mostly notably Trent, the Bucks are poised to improve on last season's 49-33 record, which was good for the No. 3 seed in the Eastern Conference during a season fraught with inconsistency. Defense could remain an issue, but with a starting lineup loaded with top-tier talent and a deeper and more talented bench, an extended playoff run is in order — and a quest for another title isn't out of the question.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Philadelphia	7:30
Oct. 25	Chicago	8:00
Oct. 27	at Brooklyn	6:00
Oct. 28	at Boston	7:30
Oct. 31	at Memphis	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Cleveland	8:00
Nov. 4	at Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 7	Utah	8:00
Nov. 8	at New York	7:30
Nov. 10	Boston	3:30
Nov. 12	Toronto	8:00
Nov. 13	Detroit	8:00
Nov. 16	at Charlotte	3:00
Nov. 18	Houston	8:00
Nov. 20	Chicago	7:30
Nov. 22	Indiana	7:30
Nov. 23	Charlotte	8:00
Nov. 26	at Miami	7:30
Nov. 30	Washington	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 3	at Detroit	7:00
Dec. 4	Atlanta	8:00
Dec. 6	at Boston	7:30
Dec. 8	at Brooklyn	3:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 20	at Cleveland	7:30

Dec. 21	Washington	8:00
Dec. 23	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 26	Brooklyn	8:00
Dec. 28	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 31	at Indiana	3:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Brooklyn	8:00
Jan. 4	Portland	8:00
Jan. 6	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 8	San Antonio	9:30
Jan. 10	at Orlando	7:00
Jan. 12	at New York	3:00
Jan. 14	Sacramento	8:00
Jan. 15	Orlando	8:00
Jan. 17	Toronto	8:00
Jan. 19	Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 22	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 23	Miami	7:30
Jan. 25	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 27	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 28	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 31	at San Antonio	8:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	Memphis	8:30
Feb. 3	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 5	at Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 7	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 9	Philadelphia	2:00
Feb. 10	Golden State	8:00
Feb. 12	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 20	L.A. Clippers	8:00

Feb. 21	at Washington	7:00
Feb. 23	Miami	7:00
Feb. 25	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 27	Denver	7:30

MARCH

March 1	at Dallas	8:30
March 4	at Atlanta	7:30
March 5	Dallas	9:30
March 8	Orlando	8:00
March 9	Cleveland	8:00
March 11	at Indiana	7:00
March 13	L.A. Lakers	7:30
March 15	Indiana	8:00
March 16	Oklahoma City	9:00
March 18	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
March 20	at Golden State	10:00
March 22	at Sacramento	10:00
March 24	at Phoenix	10:00
March 26	at Denver	9:00
March 28	New York	8:00
March 30	Atlanta	7:00

APRIL

April 1	Phoenix	8:00
April 3	at Philadelphia	7:30
April 5	at Miami	8:00
April 8	Minnesota	8:00
April 9	New Orleans	8:00
April 11	at Detroit	7:00
April 13	Detroit	1:00

All times Eastern



ATL HAWKS



JALEN JOHNSON

SCOUTING THE HAWKS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I think they did the right thing by trading Dejounte Murray. I'm just surprised they couldn't get more back. ... But it's smart that they have kept Trae Young as the face of the team. ... They seem to be hoping (No. 1 pick) Zaccharie Risacher is ready to start and make a major contribution. I have my doubts about that. ... Bogdan Bogdanović isn't as dynamic as Murray, but he'll probably be a better fit next to Young. ... Jalen Johnson has really grown and aside from Young, is their greatest reason for hope. ... When you look at this roster, they aren't bad. There are just a lot of ifs."

The Hawks gave the backcourt combination of Trae Young and Dejounte Murray two years to see if the duo could push them up the food chain in the Eastern Conference. The result? Two unsatisfying play-in appearances in two seasons, and then an offseason trade of Murray that brought back some draft capital lost in the original four-player deal to acquire him. And while the pairing made sense — giving Young a stronger defensive player who still had plus offensive skills — the numbers showed the duo wasn't effective together. With both Young and Murray on the floor last season, the team's net rating was minus-4.0, the second worst of any pairing on the Hawks who played at least 50 games together. The previous season, it was 0.3, which was 14th out of 25 combos — not ideal for your starting backcourt and top two players.

So while it was difficult to part with a player who averaged 22.5 points, 6.4 assists and 5.3 rebounds, it was clear Atlanta needed to press reset and try something different. Although the Hawks may not be better, they will be different — and armed with more hope for the future than they seemingly had.

FRONT COURT

With Murray gone, the Hawks' second-best player after Young will now be Jalen Johnson, the 6-foot-8 forward out of Duke who showed tons of potential in his third season, his first as a starter. His scoring average jumped from 5.6 to 16 points, and he likely would have been in the running for the league's Most Improved Player award had he hit the 65-game requirement (injuries limited him to 56 games). Johnson will be expected to carry an even larger load offensively this season. He can be dominant in transition, but he needs to refine his shot creation in the halfcourt to become a more consistent option. He's just below the league average from 3-point range at 35.5 percent. Defensively, the Hawks like his connectivity, and he matches up well from an athletic standpoint against almost anyone.

Clint Capela returns as the Hawks' starting center for the fifth straight season. He is in the final year of his contract, and it will likely be the 30-year-old's final season in Atlanta. Capela has been a dependable 12-point, 11-rebound

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 20-47
DIVISION: 5TH

2020-21
Record: 41-31
DIVISION: 1ST

2021-22
Record: 43-39
DIVISION: 2ND

2022-23
Record: 41-41
DIVISION: 2ND

2023-24
Record: 36-46
DIVISION: 3RD

FROM LEFT: MICHAEL CIAGLO-USA TODAY SPORTS; DAVID BANKS-USA TODAY SPORTS



TRAE YOUNG



BEYOND THE ARC

It ain't over ... The highlight of the Hawks' season was their 30-point comeback against the Boston Celtics. The comeback on March 25 was the largest of the play-by-play era (started in 1997-98) in franchise history. It also tied for the fourth-largest comeback by any team in the past 25 years. With Trae Young out with an injured finger, Atlanta trailed 68-38 in the second quarter. Thanks to an amazing 59-28 run in a little more than 18 minutes, the Hawks took the lead early in the fourth quarter and eventually pulled out a 120-118 win clinched by a De'Andre Hunter 3-pointer.

Speaking of Boston

Three nights later, the Hawks knocked off the Celtics again in Atlanta. Dejounte Murray made a pull-up jumper in the final second of overtime to give the Hawks a 123-122 win. He scored a career-high 44 points, including all of the team's 11 in overtime.

Beating the odds The Hawks entered the NBA Draft Lottery with just a 3 percent chance of getting the No. 1 pick. But the Hawks hit the jackpot and earned the top pick. The only other time the Hawks have picked first since moving to Atlanta in 1968 was in 1975, when they drafted David Thompson at No. 1. Thompson was also drafted No. 1 by the ABA's Virginia Squires; he eventually signed with the ABA's Denver Nuggets and never played for the Hawks.



performer who has ranked in the league’s top five in offensive rebounding every season he’s been with the Hawks. Onyeka Okongwu will be in the rotation and play mostly at the 5 as he enters his fifth year. He has shown consistent improvement and may be in line for a minutes bump up from last season’s 25.5 per game. Veteran Larry Nance Jr., who was acquired from the Pelicans in the Murray trade, also figures to get some minutes in the frontcourt both at the 4 and 5, although he likely wouldn’t see major minutes in a playoff series.

BACKCOURT

Young was an All-Star for the third time in his six seasons but missed 23 games late in the season with a torn ligament in his left pinkie. The Hawks were 14-14 in the 28 games Young missed for the season, and 22-32 with him on the floor. Still, he is an elite offensive player who is the focus of opposing team’s defensive gameplans. Young’s 10.8 assists per game last season were a career high, and he has increased that number every season he’s been in the league. His 37.3 percent 3-point shooting was the second-best mark of his career, and he led the Hawks with 25.7 points per game.

Second-year man Kobe Bufkin, who split last season between the G-League College Park Skyhawks and the Hawks, will be the full-time backup point guard. Bufkin averaged 23.6 points in 14 G-League games and 4.8 points in 17 games with the big club. Like a lot of other Hawks, he was hampered by injuries throughout the season and then got hurt just before the 2024 Summer League, which he missed.

Who starts at the other two wing spots might not be decided until after training camp. Bogdan Bogdanović placed fifth in Sixth Man of the Year voting, and he was usually part of the closing five last season. Bogdanović averaged 16.9 points in 30.4 minutes per game and should maintain those numbers this season. If coach Quin Snyder wants to keep that offensive punch on the bench to start games, he could turn to newly acquired Dyson Daniels, a 6-foot-8 third-

27th

The Hawks ranked 27th in defensive efficiency in 2023-24, ahead of only the Wizards, Jazz and Hornets. Atlanta has sat below the league average in this metric in all six seasons since Trae Young was drafted, but the Hawks have ranked above league average in offensive efficiency the past four seasons.



OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

- 1. **Zaccharie Risacher**
F, 6-9, 200, JL-Bourg-en-Bresse (France)
 - 2. **Nikola Đurišić**
F, 6-7, 209, KK Mega Basket (Serbia)
- Risacher will be a rotational player who may occasionally start depending on his progress. Đurišić broke his foot in the second summer league game and is expected back in November. He may spend the season in Europe.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Dyson Daniels, acquired with Cody Zeller in the Dejounte Murray trade, should provide big minutes and potentially start. Veteran big man Larry Nance Jr. will play a backup role.

ROSTER								2023-24 STATISTICS								48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY			
HEAD COACH: QUIN SNYDER (3RD SEASON; CAREER: 418-321)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
11	Trae Young	G	6-1	164	9/19/98	Oklahoma	6	54	36.0	.430	.373	.855	2.8	10.8	25.7		3.7	14.4	34.3
13	Bogdan Bogdanović	G	6-5	225	8/18/92	Fenerbahce	7	79	30.4	.428	.374	.921	3.4	3.1	16.9		5.4	4.9	26.6
1	Jalen Johnson	F	6-8	219	12/18/01	Duke	3	56	33.7	.511	.355	.728	8.7	3.6	16.0		12.4	5.2	22.8
12	De'Andre Hunter	F/G	6-8	221	12/02/97	Virginia	5	57	29.5	.459	.385	.847	3.9	1.5	15.6		6.3	2.5	25.4
15	Clint Capela	C	6-10	256	5/18/94	Elan Chalon	10	73	25.8	.571	.000	.631	10.6	1.2	11.5		19.8	2.3	21.3
17	Onyeka Okongwu	F/C	6-10	240	12/11/00	USC	4	55	25.5	.611	.333	.793	6.8	1.3	10.2		12.8	2.5	19.2
21	David Roddy	F	6-4	255	3/27/01	Colorado State	2	65	18.1	.403	.293	.691	3.2	1.2	6.5		8.6	3.3	17.3
27	Vit Krejci	G	6-8	195	6/19/00	Zaragoza	3	22	24.6	.490	.412	.833	2.4	2.3	6.1		4.6	4.4	12.0
11	Dyson Daniels	G	6-7	199	3/17/03	G League Ignite	2	61	22.3	.447	.311	.642	3.9	2.7	5.8		8.3	5.8	12.5
22	Larry Nance Jr.	F/C	6-8	245	1/01/93	Wyoming	9	61	19.9	.573	.415	.770	5.0	1.9	5.7		12.1	4.5	13.8
25	Garrison Mathews	G	6-6	215	10/24/96	Lipscomb	5	66	15.0	.456	.440	.810	1.4	0.6	4.9		4.5	1.8	15.7
4	Kobe Bufkin	G	6-5	195	9/21/03	Michigan	1	17	11.5	.370	.225	.500	1.9	1.6	4.8		8.1	6.6	19.8
26	Dominick Barlow	F	6-9	215	5/26/03	Overtime Elite	2	33	12.7	.496	.333	.690	3.4	1.1	4.4		12.9	4.1	16.5
18	Mouhamed Gueye	F	6-10	210	11/09/02	Washington State	1	6	12.1	.348	.333	.833	3.7	0.7	4.0		14.5	2.6	15.8
40	Cody Zeller	F/C	6-11	240	10/05/92	Indiana	11	43	7.4	.419	.333	.605	2.6	0.9	1.8		16.8	5.9	11.4
3	Seth Lundy	G/F	6-4	220	4/02/00	Penn State	1	9	5.8	.235	.231	.750	0.8	0.0	1.6		6.5	0.0	12.9
7	Nikola Đurišić	G	6-8	214	2/23/04	KK Mega Basket		R — First NBA Season											
10	Zaccharie Risacher	F	6-9	200	4/08/05	JL Bourg		R — First NBA Season											
	Keaton Wallace	G	6-3	185	2/26/99	UTSA		R — First NBA Season											



BOGDAN BOGDANOVIĆ

year player the Hawks received from the Pelicans who has shown some strong defensive capabilities. Daniels would help compensate for Young’s lack of size.

At the 3, De’Andre Hunter has been a consistent starter throughout his career, but he came back from an injury last season and played 20 games as a reserve. He was productive in that role, so that is an option if the Hawks want to start rookie Zaccharie Risacher, the No. 1 overall pick in the draft. Snyder would likely go with Hunter, the team’s best wing defender who shot a career-best 38.5 percent from 3-point range last season. But Hunter has been plagued by injuries in his five years in Atlanta, missing nearly a third of his games.

The Hawks see Risacher, the 19-year-old from France, as a wing who will play rotational minutes right away. His attention to defense has been an early plus.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Hawks were generally viewed as a disappointment after landing in the play-in tournament for the third straight season. But they dealt with more than their share of injuries. Five of their top eight rotation players missed an average of 25 games: Young (28), Hunter (25), Johnson (26), Okongwu (27) and Saddiq Bey (19). Their health, at a minimum, figures to improve. Will they improve upon their 36 wins? Two keys will be the continued development of Johnson, who needs to take another step forward, and the play of Risacher, who surely will have some growing pains but still could be a productive player in Year 1. Young no doubt has heard the chatter that he is not capable of being a leader on a championship team, and he will likely have a bit of a chip on his shoulder as he enters Year 7, eager to prove he can once again be the guy who led the Hawks to the Eastern Conference finals in his third season. The early over/under on the Hawks’ win total is 34.5, which would again put them in the play-in neighborhood. It is a neighborhood with which they are familiar.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Brooklyn	7:30
Oct. 25	Charlotte	7:30
Oct. 27	at Oklahoma City	7:00
Oct. 28	Washington	7:00
Oct. 30	at Washington	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Sacramento	7:30
Nov. 3	at New Orleans	7:00
Nov. 4	Boston	7:45
Nov. 6	New York	7:30
Nov. 8	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 9	Chicago	7:30
Nov. 12	at Boston	7:00
Nov. 15	Washington	7:30
Nov. 17	at Portland	6:00
Nov. 18	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 20	at Golden State	10:00
Nov. 22	at Chicago	8:00
Nov. 25	Dallas	7:30
Nov. 27	at Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 29	Cleveland	2:30
Nov. 30	at Charlotte	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	New Orleans	7:30
Dec. 4	at Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 6	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Dec. 8	Denver	6:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16: Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games		
Dec. 19	at San Antonio	9:30
Dec. 21	Memphis	7:30
Dec. 23	Minnesota	7:30
Dec. 26	Chicago	7:30
Dec. 28	Miami	3:00
Dec. 29	at Toronto	6:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 3	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 4	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 7	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 9	at Phoenix	7:30
Jan. 11	Houston	3:00
Jan. 14	Phoenix	7:30
Jan. 15	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 18	at Boston	7:00
Jan. 20	at New York	3:00
Jan. 22	Detroit	7:30
Jan. 23	Toronto	7:30
Jan. 25	Toronto	7:30
Jan. 27	at Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 30	at Cleveland	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Indiana	5:00
Feb. 3	at Detroit	7:00
Feb. 5	San Antonio	7:30
Feb. 7	Milwaukee	7:30
Feb. 8	at Washington	7:00
Feb. 10	at Orlando	7:30

Feb. 12	at New York	7:30
Feb. 20	Orlando	7:30
Feb. 23	Detroit	6:00
Feb. 24	Miami	7:30
Feb. 26	at Miami	7:30
Feb. 28	Oklahoma City	7:30

MARCH

March 3	at Memphis	8:00
March 4	Milwaukee	7:30
March 6	Indiana	7:30
March 8	Indiana	7:30
March 10	Philadelphia	7:30
March 12	Charlotte	7:30
March 14	L.A. Clippers	7:30
March 16	at Brooklyn	6:00
March 18	at Charlotte	7:00
March 22	Golden State	7:00
March 23	Philadelphia	6:00
March 25	at Houston	8:00
March 27	at Miami	7:30
March 30	at Milwaukee	7:00

APRIL

April 1	Portland	7:30
April 2	at Dallas	8:30
April 5	New York	3:00
April 6	Utah	6:00
April 8	at Orlando	7:00
April 10	at Brooklyn	7:30
April 11	at Philadelphia	7:00
April 13	Orlando	1:00

All times Eastern



SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: 4TH

CHARLOTTE HORNETS

Things haven't been going well for the Charlotte Hornets in recent years, and they've made massive organizational changes in order to address those issues. Longtime head of basketball operations Mitch Kupchak and retired head coach Steve Clifford are out. Jeff Peterson is the new man in charge, and former Boston Celtics assistant Charles Lee replaces Clifford.

Those changes won't necessarily lead to immediate wins. The Hornets are still one of the youngest teams in the league. They have been sloughing off veterans and taking on bad contracts in order to prioritize draft picks and prospects over the past year.

That approach has given Charlotte a brighter future, led by former 2021 Rookie of the Year LaMelo Ball. Brandon Miller, who was selected second overall in the 2023 draft and finished third in Rookie of the Year voting last season, is another prospect who has proved that he's worth building around.

No member of Charlotte's projected starting five is older than 26. Miles Bridges is the old hand, with five seasons under his belt. With a rookie head coach leading this group, there may be growing pains ahead. But these guys should play a fun and fast brand of basketball that injects hope into the franchise.

FRONTCOURT

Miller was a controversial pick when he was picked second overall ahead of guard Scoot Henderson in the 2023 draft. But the selection looks like a home run today. Miller provided most of the highlights last season, showing defensive skill and shooting prowess. That could help him morph someday into a version of Paul George, his favorite player and newly minted mentor.

Bridges is a nice third option to pair alongside Miller and Ball. His future has been the elephant in the room ever since he missed the entire 2022-23 season due to domestic violence charges. The Hornets since have committed to him, signing him to a three-year, \$75 million contract over the offseason. He's been a good scorer, but Clifford took veiled shots at the 6-foot-7 forward's work habits. Those will have to change under the new regime.



MILES BRIDGES

SCOUTING THE HORNETS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"They're starting over with Jeff Peterson running the front office and Charles Lee as coach. They needed change. ... Obviously, a big key is if they can keep LaMelo Ball on the court. They're just a totally different team without him. ... Brandon Miller was magnificent as a rookie. He looks as if he'll be a major difference-maker for a long time. ... Keeping Miles Bridges was good for both sides. He can really play. With Ball, Miller and Bridges, Charlotte definitely has some promise. ... Landing Josh Green (from Dallas) could turn out to be an underrated move. ... I'm just wondering if Lee can coax them to defend."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 23-42
DIVISION: 3RD

2020-21
Record: 33-39
DIVISION: 4TH

2021-22
Record: 43-39
DIVISION: 3RD

2022-23
Record: 27-55
DIVISION: 5TH

2023-24
Record: 21-61
DIVISION: 4TH

FROM LEFT: DALE ZANINE-USA TODAY SPORTS; RICK OSENTOSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS



LAMELO BALL



BEYOND THE ARC

Full circle A day after announcing his retirement, Kemba Walker announced he would be joining the Hornets coaching staff. Walker was drafted with the ninth overall pick by Charlotte in 2011 and is the franchise leader in points with 12,009. Injuries robbed him of a graceful ending to his playing career, but he will stay close to the game in a city that loves him.

Trade deadline bump The Hornets remade their team at the deadline, shipping away Terry Rozier, PJ Washington and Gordon Hayward while bringing in underutilized guard Tre Mann from Oklahoma City and Grant Williams from Dallas. The Hornets shockingly won four out of their next five after the deadline.

Terry who? Rozier played parts of five seasons for the Hornets before being traded. He quickly burned the bridge leading back to Charlotte, stating that, "In Charlotte, you're kind of used to losing. It's in the DNA." The Hornets gave Rozier's No. 3 jersey to reserve Marques Bolden at the end of the year, to which Rozier simply tweeted, "Smh."

Taking down the champs The Hornets may have been one of the worst teams in the league, but they beat the eventual-champion Boston Celtics in overtime on Nov. 20, 121-118. It was one of the rare games in which the Hornets had their whole team healthy and available.



Grant Williams should put some pressure on Bridges throughout the season. After struggling to fit in with the Dallas Mavericks, Williams was traded to Charlotte in February and played good two-way basketball.

Mark Williams should be the starting center. The high-flying big man could get some All-Defensive buzz one day. He's not much of a shooter, but he can finish lobbs with the best of them. He's also a terrific offensive rebounder. Back problems limited him last season. Like many of the players on this roster, he needs to stay healthy.

Nick Richards is a decent young backup who started 51 games at center for the team last season. He's got good size and rebounding, but he's a limited offensive player who has less upside than Williams.

BACKCOURT

It's tough to remember that Ball was one of the youngest players to ever selected for an All-Star Game, back in 2022. The Hornets were a 43-win team back then, but seemingly nothing has gone right for them since, as he's incurred several injuries.

Hopefully, that's a thing of the past. Ball is still one of the premier passers in the game. He's a good volume 3-point shooter who should get this team cooking in transition and conceivably get the Hornets back into the top half of NBA offenses.

Charlotte gave up two second-round picks in exchange for Josh Green, who turns 24 in November and should get the first crack at starting as the shooting guard alongside Ball. Green is a hustle defender and solid 3-point shooter.

Tre Mann and Vasilije Micic will challenge Green for that last starting spot. Neither player did much for the Oklahoma City Thunder, but both looked much better in Charlotte after being acquired at the trade deadline. Mann is a natural scorer who started every game he played for the Hornets last season. Micic is a terrific passer and pick-and-roll maestro who provides tough veteran play.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Hornets will have modest expectations this season. Their over/under is at 27.5 wins, which would represent a 6.5-win increase over last season.

-10.2

The Hornets were outscored by an average of 10.2 points per game last season, which was the worst mark since the 2020-21 Oklahoma City Thunder (-10.6). They ranked 29th in defensive rating and 28th on offense. Needless to say, there's a lot of room for improvement.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

1. Tidjane Salaün
F, 6-9, 207, Cholet Basket (France)

2. K.J. Simpson
G, 6-2, 189, Colorado

Salaün boasts a 7-foot-2 wingspan and great athleticism that makes him an intriguing prospect. He shot the ball well in Europe, showing some 3-and-D potential. But he remains very raw. Simpson is a scoring guard who spent three years at Colorado. He will hone his skills in the G League.

Other Newcomers

The big offseason move came via a six-team trade, where Charlotte added former Mavericks shooting guard Josh Green, who is an effective 3-point shooter and high-effort defender.

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE								
HEAD COACH: CHARLES LEE (1ST SEASON; CAREER: 0-0)																	2023-24 STATISTICS						PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS						
1	LaMelo Ball	G	6-7	180	8/22/01	Illawarra	4	22	32.3	43.3	35.5	86.5	5.1	8.0	23.9		7.6	11.9	35.5						
0	Miles Bridges	F	6-7	225	3/21/98	Michigan State	5	69	37.4	46.2	34.9	82.5	7.3	3.3	21.0		9.4	4.3	26.9						
24	Brandon Miller	F	6-7	200	11/22/02	Alabama	1	74	32.2	44.0	37.3	82.7	4.3	2.4	17.3		6.3	3.5	25.8						
5	Mark Williams	C	7-0	240	12/16/01	Duke	2	19	26.8	64.9	0.0	71.9	9.7	1.2	12.7		17.4	2.1	22.8						
2	Grant Williams	F	6-6	236	11/30/98	Tennessee	5	76	28.0	45.6	37.5	75.7	4.2	2.3	10.3		7.2	3.9	17.7						
4	Nick Richards	C	7-0	245	11/29/97	Kentucky	4	67	26.2	69.1	0.0	73.7	8.0	0.8	9.7		14.7	1.5	17.8						
23	Tre Mann	G	6-3	178	2/03/01	Florida	3	41	24.1	45.9	37.3	76.3	3.6	4.0	9.3		7.2	8.0	18.6						
8	Josh Green	G	6-5	200	11/16/00	Arizona	4	57	26.4	47.9	38.5	68.4	3.2	2.3	8.2		5.9	4.1	15.0						
11	Cody Martin	F	6-6	205	9/28/95	Nevada	5	28	26.9	38.1	31.4	60.6	3.9	3.7	7.5		6.9	6.6	13.5						
22	Vasilije Micic	G	6-3	188	1/13/94	Serbia	1	60	19.6	43.0	27.9	81.3	1.5	4.4	7.0		3.6	10.7	17.2						
8	Nick Smith Jr.	G	6-2	185	4/18/04	Arkansas	1	51	14.3	39.1	43.2	86.7	1.4	1.2	5.9		4.7	3.9	19.9						
30	Seth Curry	G	6-1	185	8/23/90	Duke	10	44	14.0	39.2	35.2	90.3	1.5	1.0	5.1		5.3	3.4	17.6						
25	Moussa Diabate	F	6-9	210	1/21/02	Michigan	2	11	5.8	52.6	0.0	64.3	2.2	0.4	2.6		17.9	3.0	21.7						
67	Taj Gibson	F	6-9	232	6/24/85	USC	15	20	10.2	40.5	20.0	100	1.9	0.6	1.7		8.7	2.6	8.0						
	Tidjane Salaün	F	6-9	207	8/10/05	Cholet Basket		R — First NBA Season																	
	K.J. Simpson	G	6-2	189	8/08/02	Colorado		R — First NBA Season																	



BRANDON MILLER

They should be able to comfortably surpass that mark, given better injury luck with Ball. He had them above .500 in his last healthy season and was looking like a top-25 player in the league.

Charlotte has some good guards and fresh legs on its roster that should help the Hornets drastically improve offensively. Their starting five is as good as any other mid-tier team in the league.

Where the Hornets do have problems is with their wing and big depth. It will be difficult for them to recover from even minor injuries to any of their forwards or centers. Aside from Miller, most of their recent draft picks are not ready to contribute at a high level.

The Hornets won't have too much incentive to win. They owe their first-round pick to the San Antonio Spurs if it lands outside of the lottery. The 2025 draft class is looking excellent, so if Charlotte does find itself in contention for the playoffs, it may not push too hard to climb up the standings.

Getting out of the basement will be the goal for this team. The Hornets were tied with the Portland Trail Blazers for the third-worst record in the league last season. Given stronger coaching and the improvement of the Hornets' young players, they should challenge for a play-in tournament spot.

The Hornets also need to use this season to evaluate all of their pieces. Miller and Ball are definite keepers. But nobody else on the roster is guaranteed to be in Charlotte three years from now. Many of these players will be in line for expensive second contracts at the same time. Who will earn one?

Player development is paramount this season. You never know with new coaches, but Lee has an impeccable résumé, having won championships with Milwaukee and Boston as an assistant. He will take the lessons he learned from Mike Budenholzer and Joe Mazzulla and try to use them to build a winning culture in Charlotte.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Houston	8:00
Oct. 25	at Atlanta	7:30
Oct. 26	Miami	7:00
Oct. 30	Toronto	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Boston	7:00
Nov. 2	Boston	6:00
Nov. 4	at Minnesota	9:00
Nov. 6	Detroit	7:00
Nov. 8	Indiana	7:00
Nov. 10	at Philadelphia	7:00
Nov. 12	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 16	Milwaukee	3:00
Nov. 17	at Cleveland	6:00
Nov. 19	at Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 21	Detroit	7:00
Nov. 23	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 25	Orlando	7:00
Nov. 27	Miami	7:00
Nov. 29	New York	12:00
Nov. 30	Atlanta	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 3	Philadelphia	7:00
Dec. 5	at New York	7:30
Dec. 7	Cleveland	1:00
Dec. 8	at Indiana	5:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 20	at Philadelphia	7:00
Dec. 23	Houston	7:00
Dec. 26	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 28	Oklahoma City	6:00
Dec. 30	Chicago	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 3	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 5	at Cleveland	6:00
Jan. 7	Phoenix	7:00
Jan. 9	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 11	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 12	at Phoenix	9:00
Jan. 15	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 17	at Chicago	9:30
Jan. 20	Dallas	12:00
Jan. 22	at Memphis	7:00
Jan. 24	Portland	7:00
Jan. 25	New Orleans	7:00
Jan. 27	L.A. Lakers	7:00
Jan. 29	Brooklyn	7:00
Jan. 31	L.A. Clippers	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Denver	7:00
Feb. 3	Washington	7:00
Feb. 5	Milwaukee	7:00
Feb. 7	San Antonio	7:00
Feb. 9	at Detroit	1:00
Feb. 10	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 12	at Orlando	7:00
Feb. 20	at Denver	9:00

Feb. 22	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 24	at Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 25	at Golden State	10:00
Feb. 27	at Dallas	8:30

MARCH

March 1	Washington	6:00
March 3	Golden State	7:00
March 5	Minnesota	7:00
March 7	Cleveland	7:00
March 8	Brooklyn	6:00
March 10	at Miami	7:30
March 12	at Atlanta	7:30
March 14	at San Antonio	8:00
March 18	Atlanta	7:00
March 20	New York	7:00
March 21	at Oklahoma City	8:00
March 23	at Miami	6:00
March 25	Orlando	7:00
March 28	at Toronto	7:30
March 30	at New Orleans	7:00
March 31	Utah	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at Indiana	7:00
April 4	Sacramento	7:00
April 6	Chicago	1:00
April 8	Memphis	7:00
April 9	at Toronto	7:30
April 11	at Boston	7:30
April 13	at Boston	1:00

All times Eastern



SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: **2ND**

MIA HEAT



JIMMY BUTLER

SCOUTING THE HEAT

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"It's fair to wonder whether their run may be over. I'm beginning to think that maybe Jimmy Butler is wearing out his welcome with Pat Riley. ... They re-signed Kevin Love and Haywood Highsmith, and I thought each needed to be replaced. Their only decent free-agent addition was Alec Burks. ... Over the last two years they've lost Max Strus (to Cleveland), Caleb Martin (to Philadelphia) and Gabe Vincent (to the L.A. Lakers). All of those guys were vital to their Finals run in 2023. ... I'd be surprised if they were anything other than eliminated in the first round, though Erik Spoelstra always coaches them up."

For about nine minutes, it seemed like Jimmy Butler was going to do the thing. It was mid-April, and the Miami Heat were facing the Philadelphia 76ers in a play-in game, with the winner earning the right to face the New York Knicks in the playoffs (or, more importantly, avoid the eventual-champion Boston Celtics). Butler sprinted out of the gate, recording six points, two assists and two steals. He was about to make it eight points after he leaked out in transition and went up for a layup, but Kelly Oubre Jr. attempted the block and landed awkwardly on Butler's right knee. Just like that, #PlayoffJimmySzn was over nearly as soon as it began.

Butler, fueled by adrenaline, limped through the rest of the game, but the Heat lost by a point. He didn't play in Miami's second play-in game or in their first-round loss to the Celtics, ending the Heat's Eastern Conference title defense with a whimper.

Had Butler not gotten injured, could the Heat have uncorked another miraculous run from play-in round to NBA Finals participant? We'll never know.

The Heat are running back the same group. Team president Pat Riley hinted at a quiet offseason during his end-of-season press conference. "Those things you're doing to try to win, if they aren't working, let's change," he said. "We have to change some things, but we surely are not going to rip anything apart here."

The Heat and Butler, who is playing without a contract extension, enter something of a last-dance season: one more chance to make a run and win a title.

It would be surprising if that happened. The Celtics will return with their championship team intact, and the Knicks, 76ers and Milwaukee Bucks got better. The Indiana Pacers, Cleveland Cavaliers and Orlando Magic will build off strong seasons. The Heat, meanwhile, remain the same.

FRONTCOURT

The incumbents from last season have the edge to start on opening night: Bam Adebayo, Nikola Jović and Butler are penciled in here. It's internal growth and depth that will provide coach Erik Spoelstra with new options.

Dating back to the end of last season and extending

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 44-29
DIVISION: 1ST

2020-21
Record: 40-32
DIVISION: 2ND

2021-22
Record: 53-29
DIVISION: 1ST

2022-23
Record: 44-38
DIVISION: 1ST

2023-24
Record: 46-36
DIVISION: 2ND

FROM LEFT: BILL STREICHER-USA TODAY SPORTS; MIKE WATTERS-USA TODAY SPORTS



TYLER HERRO



BEYOND THE ARC

Paint brush in the post

Jaime Jaquez Jr.'s surprising rookie season included this memorable quote in an interview with *The Ringer*: "When you're in an empty gym, or you're at the park by yourself, that's the canvas and, you and the ball, you're the paint brush. You're just trying to make something beautiful happen," Jaquez said. "It's like dance. It's like jazz music. It's very cultural. So you make it look good, you feel good, you play good. So it all goes hand in hand."

Best-case scenario If rookie first-round pick Kel'el Ware could go up against any former Heat player, he says he'd pick Chris Bosh. For Ware, a lean 7-footer with shooting chops, Bosh is a good role model.

Jovial Jović The friendliest player in the Heat locker room? Nikola Jović. The 21-year-old goes out of his way to greet reporters and talk to them about their content.

How's that? Random fact: Heat guard Josh Richardson eats his Oreos with a spoon.

A dream come true Terry Rozier's favorite player growing up: Dwyane Wade. Rozier was in the building, playing for the Charlotte Hornets, when Heat president Pat Riley announced that the organization planned to erect a statue honoring Wade next year. Rozier was traded to Miami a few weeks later.



into his Olympic run with Team USA, Adebayo is experimenting with adding a 3-point shot to his toolbox. He has the touch to be a respectable shooter who can mix in a couple of open looks a game.

Butler is coming off a season in which he averaged the fewest points, rebounds, assists and steals in the last four years and played just 60 games. Not only does he need to be more available, but he also needs to be more engaged in the games in which he does play.

Jović emerged as the team's starting power forward by the end of last season. At 6-foot-10, he can handle the ball and make outside jumpers, and he has an intriguing skill set that pairs well with Adebayo and Butler in the frontcourt. If the 21-year-old can make another leap as a consistent shooter and defender, Miami may have its frontcourt of the future.

Where things get interesting is when Spoelstra gets into his rotation. The Heat's first-round pick, Kel'el Ware, is a 7-foot flyswatter with the skill set to play next to either Adebayo or Jović. At Indiana, Ware showed off a willingness to take pick-and-pop 3s, but he thrived in summer league primarily as a rim-roller who caught lobs and finished.

How often Spoelstra will implement two-big lineups with Ware and Adebayo remains an open question, but he is expected to find ways to play Adebayo at power forward this season. Doing so would allow Adebayo to lean into the things that make him special as a versatile defender and free him up to be more of a scorer on offense. It could allow the Heat to switch on defense around Ware in a drop and could add size to a small lineup without sacrificing spacing if Ware's shot proves legitimate.

BACKCOURT

This unit is still a work in progress. After acquiring Terry Rozier in January, the Heat didn't get much of a look at the backcourt they envisioned. Rozier and Tyler Herro played only 187 minutes together, to mixed results.

If the Heat break them up, they'll have to decide who starts and who comes off the bench. Herro is the better 3-point shooter with a more established

5-20

That was the Heat's record vs. teams with a top-10 point differential last season, per Cleaning the Glass. Only Portland, Charlotte, Toronto, Washington and Detroit — tanking teams — won fewer games against the best teams.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

1. Kel'el Ware
C, 7-0, 230, Indiana
2. Pelle Larsson
G, 6-5, 212, Arizona

Ware and Larsson were standouts during the Heat's run to the Las Vegas Summer League championship. Ware impressed with his rim protection and finishing, while Larsson brought playmaking, scoring and hustle. Ware should be the key to some of Miami's most interesting lineups. Playing time will be harder to come by for Larsson, but he should get spot minutes.

Other Newcomers

In free agency, the Heat lost Caleb Martin to Philadelphia but added veteran Alec Burks. That's a downgrade, but Burks is a proven scorer.

ROSTER							2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: ERIK SPOELSTRA (17TH SEASON; CAREER: 750-527))																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
22	Jimmy Butler	F	6-7	230	9/14/89	Marquette	13	60	34.0	49.9	41.4	85.8	5.3	5.0	20.8		7.5	7.0	29.3
14	Tyler Herro	G	6-5	195	1/20/00	Kentucky	5	42	33.5	44.1	39.6	85.6	5.3	4.5	20.8		7.6	6.4	29.8
2	Terry Rozier	G	6-1	190	3/17/94	Louisville	9	61	33.4	44.3	36.3	86.9	4.0	5.6	19.8		5.8	8.0	28.3
13	Bam Adebayo	C/F	6-9	255	7/18/97	Kentucky	7	71	34.0	52.1	35.7	75.5	10.4	3.9	19.3		14.6	5.5	27.2
55	Duncan Robinson	F	6-7	215	4/22/94	Michigan	6	68	28.0	45.0	39.5	88.9	2.5	2.8	12.9		4.4	4.8	22.0
11	Jaime Jaquez Jr.	G	6-6	225	2/18/01	UCLA	1	75	28.2	48.9	32.2	81.1	3.8	2.6	11.9		6.5	4.4	20.2
18	Alec Burks	G	6-5	214	7/20/91	Colorado	13	66	18.4	36.9	37.6	86.8	2.3	1.3	10.4		5.9	3.5	27.3
0	Josh Richardson	G	6-5	200	9/15/93	Tennessee	9	43	25.6	44.4	34.7	94.4	2.8	2.4	9.9		5.3	4.6	18.5
42	Kevin Love	F/C	6-8	251	9/07/88	UCLA	16	55	16.8	44.0	34.4	78.7	6.1	2.1	8.8		17.6	6.0	25.2
5	Nikola Jović	F	6-10	205	6/09/03	Mega Basket	2	46	19.5	45.2	39.9	70.2	4.2	2.0	7.7		10.3	4.8	18.9
24	Haywood Highsmith	F	6-5	220	12/09/96	Wheeling Jesuit	4	66	20.7	46.5	39.6	63.9	3.2	1.1	6.1		7.4	2.5	14.2
31	Thomas Bryant	C/F	6-10	248	7/31/97	Indiana	7	38	11.6	57.7	18.2	87.2	3.7	0.6	5.7		15.3	2.5	23.6
9	Dru Smith	G	6-2	203	12/30/97	Missouri	2	9	14.5	45.5	41.2	100	1.6	1.6	4.3		5.1	5.1	14.3
21	Cole Swider	F	6-8	220	5/08/99	Syracuse	2	18	4.8	39.5	33.3	100	0.4	0.3	2.3		3.9	2.8	23.2
15	Alondes Williams	G	6-4	210	6/19/99	Wake Forest	2	7	2.2	25.0	0.0	100	0.1	0.0	0.7		3.1	0.0	15.4
	Josh Christopher	G	6-4	215	12/08/01	Arizona State	2	Did Not Play in the NBA											
	Keshad Johnson	F	6-7	225	6/23/01	Arizona		R — First NBA Season											
9	Pelle Larsson	G	6-5	215	2/23/01	Arizona		R — First NBA Season											
	Isaiah Stevens	G	6-0	185	11/01/00	Colorado State		R — First NBA Season											
7	Kel'el Ware	C	7-0	230	4/20/04	Indiana		R — First NBA Season											



BAM ADEBAYO

history with the team’s tentpole players. Rozier is closer to a natural point guard, offers more point-of-attack defense and gets to the rim more consistently.

Spoelstra doesn’t have to decide now or after training camp. He could open the season by getting a longer look at the Rozier-Herro backcourt and make a decision later. If he were to bench one of them, then the other guard spot likely would go to either Duncan Robinson or Haywood Highsmith.

Robinson is an elite 3-point shooter who spaces the floor on and off the ball. His dribble-handoff chemistry with Adebayo is unrivaled, and he’s improved as a ball-handler and passer. However, Robinson is a weak link defensively, and like Herro, he can be targeted on that end.

Highsmith isn’t the prolific 3-point shooter that Robinson is, but he did make 40 percent of his long-range attempts on a lower volume last season. What separates Highsmith is his defense. He’s an elite wing defender who can guard multiple positions and could help unlock a switching scheme if that’s what the Heat want to do. One other wrinkle: Highsmith makes significantly less than Herro, Rozier and Robinson. The Heat don’t succumb to contractual politics as much as other teams, but they aren’t immune to it, either.

FINAL ANALYSIS

On paper, the Heat don’t look much different — and NBA teams don’t often get dramatically different results without substantive changes. But maybe the Heat don’t need dramatic change. No playoff team had more games lost to injury than the Heat last season, and only two wins separated them from the No. 4 seed in the Eastern Conference. Better injury luck, a more engaged Butler, internal development and some new tricks could be the difference between the play-in tournament and home-court advantage in the first round. The Heat aren’t a championship contender, but they are a playoff team that nobody wants to face.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Orlando	7:30
Oct. 26	at Charlotte	7:00
Oct. 28	Detroit	7:30
Oct. 30	New York	7:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Washington	9:30
Nov. 4	Sacramento	8:15
Nov. 6	at Phoenix	9:00
Nov. 8	at Denver	9:00
Nov. 10	at Minnesota	7:00
Nov. 12	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 15	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 17	at Indiana	5:00
Nov. 18	Philadelphia	7:30
Nov. 24	Dallas	6:00
Nov. 26	Milwaukee	7:30
Nov. 27	at Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 29	Toronto	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Toronto	6:00
Dec. 2	at Boston	7:30
Dec. 4	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Dec. 7	Phoenix	8:00
Dec. 8	Cleveland	6:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17: Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds		
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16: Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games		
Dec. 20	Oklahoma City	8:00
Dec. 21	at Orlando	7:00

Dec. 23	Brooklyn	7:30
Dec. 26	at Orlando	7:00
Dec. 28	at Atlanta	3:00
Dec. 29	at Houston	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	New Orleans	7:30
Jan. 2	Indiana	7:30
Jan. 4	Utah	8:00
Jan. 6	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 7	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 9	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 11	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 13	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 15	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Jan. 17	Denver	8:00
Jan. 19	San Antonio	3:00
Jan. 21	Portland	7:30
Jan. 23	at Milwaukee	7:30
Jan. 25	at Brooklyn	6:00
Jan. 27	Orlando	7:30
Jan. 29	Cleveland	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at San Antonio	8:30
Feb. 4	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 5	at Philadelphia	7:30
Feb. 7	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 10	Boston	7:30
Feb. 12	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 13	at Dallas	8:30
Feb. 21	at Toronto	7:30
Feb. 23	at Milwaukee	7:00

Feb. 24	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 26	Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 28	Indiana	8:00

MARCH

March 2	New York	6:00
March 3	Washington	7:30
March 5	at Cleveland	7:00
March 7	Minnesota	8:00
March 8	Chicago	8:00
March 10	Charlotte	7:30
March 12	L.A. Clippers	8:00
March 14	Boston	7:00
March 15	at Memphis	8:00
March 17	at New York	7:30
March 19	Detroit	7:30
March 21	Houston	8:00
March 23	Charlotte	6:00
March 25	Golden State	7:30
March 27	Atlanta	7:30
March 29	at Philadelphia	7:30
March 31	at Washington	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at Boston	7:30
April 3	Memphis	7:30
April 5	Milwaukee	8:00
April 7	Philadelphia	7:30
April 9	at Chicago	8:00
April 11	at New Orleans	8:00
April 13	Washington	1:00

All times Eastern



SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: **1st**

ORL MAGIC

For the Orlando Magic, returning to the postseason for the first time in four years was a tall order. Head coach Jamahl Mosley's squad won the most regular-season games for the franchise in more than a decade, finished fifth in a highly competitive East and forced a Game 7 in the opening round.

Still, merely reaching the playoffs is only the start for a young squad that now has a taste of the postseason. Entering this season, the Magic have their eyes set on not only returning to the playoffs but also advancing.

Orlando last won a playoff series in 2010 despite five trips since then. But don't tell that to the modern Magic core of Paolo Banchero, Franz Wagner and Jalen Suggs.

The trio feels that what they went through last season will only help them moving forward. The group witnessed first hand how small the margin for error is in the playoffs when they fell in seven games to the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Of course, returning to the playoffs and having success on that stage is easier said than done. But very little has been easy for an organization that's gone through years of losing to rebuild to this point.

Under Mosley's guidance, the Magic feel they've put in the work to do some postseason damage. Now's their chance to prove it.

FRONTCOURT

In addition to Banchero and Wagner, the defensive anchor in the frontcourt is starting center Wendell Carter Jr. The 6-foot-10 veteran might be slightly undersized compared to a traditional center, but he's a great fit for what Mosley wants to accomplish on both ends of the court. Carter has a sharp understanding of Orlando's offense and can attack the rim as a lob threat. He can also help spread the floor by offering a reliable 3-point shot from either corner.

Defensively, he's switchable and helps cover the rim as force in the paint. Carter can help defend multiple positions, but his availability has proven to be an issue due to various injuries over the years.

It's part of the reason why Orlando's frontcourt depth is as strong as it is. Behind Carter are Moritz Wagner and Goga Bitadze, a pair of centers who each offer strengths



FRANZ WAGNER

SCOUTING THE MAGIC

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"In any other year, they may be considered the beasts of the East. As it stands, they should be considered a major sleeper. ... They have great talent up front in Paolo Banchero and [Franz] Wagner, and anytime you have that kind of size and productivity, you're a threat. ... Kentavious Caldwell-Pope was a huge addition. He's an excellent defender, has won a title and doesn't need the ball to make a difference. ... Jalen Suggs and Caldwell-Pope are two of the best backcourt defenders in the league, right up there with Boston. ... A lot of how far they go will depend on the bench, which I think is pretty good."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 33-40
DIVISION: 2ND

2020-21
Record: 21-51
DIVISION: 5TH

2021-22
Record: 22-60
DIVISION: 5TH

2022-23
Record: 34-48
DIVISION: 4TH

2023-24
Record: 47-35
DIVISION: 1ST

FROM LEFT: NATHAN RAY SEEBECK-USA TODAY SPORTS; KEN BLAZE-USA TODAY SPORTS



PAOLO BANCHERO



BEYOND THE ARC

No-brainer Kentavious Caldwell-Pope had this to say about joining the Magic in free agency: “Just by watching them play, and them being relentless on both ends made my choice pretty easy. I just want to come in and fit right into this organization and do what I do, [which is] shoot the ball and play defense.”

Elite company Paolo Banchero joined Michael Jordan, LeBron James and Luka Dončić as the only NBA players during the past 40 years to register career averages of 20-plus points, six-plus rebounds and four-plus assists at age 21 or younger.

Quite the compliment Franz Wagner took part in his first Olympics playing alongside his older brother, Moritz, for Germany and made quite an impression. “I’ve just become a big fan of Franz Wagner,” Hall of Famer Dwyane Wade said of the Magic forward at the Paris Olympics. “To be able to see him up close and personal, we just saw something pretty special. This guy has a big, bright future in front of him.”

Gotta collect ’em all Cole Anthony is a rabid fan of the popular franchise Pokémon. He’s played the video game for years, worn sneakers featuring popular Pokémon characters and even collects the cards. Occasionally, you can find him playing Pokémon GO in the Magic locker room.



and weaknesses. Wagner is more than just an “energy guy” despite often wearing his emotions on his sleeve. He’s crafty in the paint and thrives in the pick-and-roll when heading toward the basket. His impact goes beyond basketball, and he’s the type of player you want on your team.

A third-stringer in Orlando, Bitadze likely had offers to depart, but he’s still young and provides upside at his size. As with Wagner, emotions can get the best of Bitadze, but when he’s at his best, he’s defending the rim at a high level and scoring in the paint with success.

Look beyond the three centers, and you’ll find an extremely versatile group of players in Franz Wagner, Banchemero and Jonathan Isaac.

The key cog to Orlando’s offense, Banchemero can create shots for himself and his teammates in various ways because opposing defenses will focus on him. He excelled in recognizing this in Year 2, when his assists increased to 5.4 per game from the 3.7 average he recorded during his Rookie of the Year campaign.

Although he will need to improve his 3-point shooting, Franz Wagner should continue to improve as a playmaker for the Magic and be effective both on and off the ball. He leans on his fancy footwork and patience to drive to the rim.

Isaac showed what’s possible when he’s healthy, providing strong play mostly as a reserve in 58 games last season, but sustaining that availability will be key for him this year. One of the league’s top defenders, he could fight for a spot in Orlando’s starting lineup, but it’s likely he’ll continue to serve as an X-factor off the bench.

Banchemero, Franz Wagner and Isaac are listed as forwards on the Magic’s roster, but all three can play multiple positions because of their size and versatility.

BACKCOURT

Unlike the frontcourt, Orlando’s backcourt underwent change this offseason. The Magic added veteran guard Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and moved on from point guard Markelle Fultz.

Fultz helped the Magic in more ways than one over the course of five years with the franchise, but as last season progressed, it became clear he was no longer a fit for what the team needed.

7-33

In 2023-24, the Magic went 40-2 when leading (or tied) after the third quarter. However, Orlando was 7-33 when trailing after the third. In order for the Magic to jump into the upper echelon of the Eastern Conference, they’ll have to find a way to fight back late in games.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Pick

1. Tristan da Silva
F, 6-8, 217, Colorado

The Magic picked outside the draft lottery for the first time in four years but still struck gold in da Silva. A polished player with four seasons of college experience, he’s the prototypical prospect Orlando searches for year in and year out, offering size and versatility.

Other Newcomers

The Magic also signed two-time NBA champion **Kentavious Caldwell-Pope**. Bringing 3-point shooting and elite defense, the veteran guard is a sure-fire starter for the Magic. He’s durable too, having played in 96 percent of regular-season games since 2014.

ROSTER							2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: JAMAHL MOSLEY (4TH SEASON; CAREER: 103-143)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
5	Paolo Banchero	F	6-10	250	11/12/02	Duke	2	80	35.0	.455	.339	.725	6.9	5.4	22.6		9.5	7.4	30.9
22	Franz Wagner	F	6-10	220	8/27/01	Michigan	3	72	32.5	.482	.281	.850	5.3	3.7	19.7		7.8	5.5	29.2
4	Jalen Suggs	G	6-5	205	6/03/01	Gonzaga	3	75	27.0	.471	.397	.756	3.1	2.7	12.6		5.4	4.9	22.4
50	Cole Anthony	G	6-2	185	5/15/00	North Carolina	4	81	22.4	.435	.338	.826	3.8	2.9	11.6		8.2	6.2	24.7
34	Wendell Carter Jr.	C/F	6-10	270	4/16/99	Duke	6	55	25.6	.525	.374	.694	6.9	1.7	11.0		13.0	3.2	20.6
21	Moritz Wagner	F/C	6-11	245	4/26/97	Michigan	6	80	17.7	.601	.330	.814	4.3	1.2	10.9		11.8	3.3	29.5
5	Kentavious Caldwell-Pope	G	6-5	204	2/18/93	Georgia	11	76	31.6	.460	.406	.894	2.4	2.4	10.1		3.7	3.7	15.3
14	Gary Harris	G	6-4	210	9/14/94	Michigan State	10	54	24.0	.441	.371	.756	1.7	1.6	6.9		3.4	3.2	13.8
1	Jonathan Isaac	F	6-10	230	10/03/97	Florida State	5	58	15.8	.510	.375	.720	4.5	0.5	6.8		13.6	1.6	20.6
35	Goga Bitadze	C/F	6-10	250	7/20/99	Mega Basket	5	62	15.4	.603	.143	.655	4.6	1.3	5.0		14.3	4.0	15.6
0	Anthony Black	G	6-7	200	1/20/04	Arkansas	1	69	16.9	.466	.394	.613	2.0	1.3	4.6		5.7	3.8	13.0
2	Caleb Houstan	G	6-8	205	1/09/03	Michigan	2	59	13.8	.388	.373	.808	1.4	0.5	4.3		4.9	1.7	14.9
12	Trevelin Queen	G	6-5	190	2/25/97	New Mexico State	3	14	11.8	.368	.176	.750	1.4	1.3	2.9		5.8	5.2	11.7
1	Cory Joseph	G	6-2	200	8/20/91	Texas	13	26	11.4	.359	.310	.571	1.2	1.6	2.4		4.9	6.8	10.2
13	Jett Howard	G	6-6	215	9/14/03	Michigan	1	18	3.7	.333	.280	.500	0.4	0.3	1.6		5.1	4.3	20.9
	Tristan da Silva	F	6-8	217	5/15/01	Colorado													
R — First NBA Season																			



JALEN SUGGS

Suggs’ growth had a lot to do with that. Entering this season, Orlando feels confident in his ability to serve as the squad’s point guard. He’s improved his 3-point shooting and continued to defend at a high level while earning second-team All-Defensive honors. By pairing Suggs with Caldwell-Pope, Orlando now features a dangerous defensive backcourt.

Beyond those two players, questions remain in the development of younger guards such as Anthony Black, Jett Howard and Caleb Houston.

Cole Anthony will look to bounce back from an up-and-down season as the backup point guard, but he almost certainly will feel pressure from Black, who showcased his ability to command the offense in his second Summer League.

Howard spent a year with Orlando’s G League affiliate as a rookie and believes he’s put in the work to crack the rotation. But he’ll have to compete with Gary Harris, who will continue to offer poise from beyond the arc as a fill-in starter.

A 3-and-D prospect, Houston can start in a pinch, but he’ll have to continue to improve as a defender to remain in the rotation when the team is healthy.

Orlando also added veteran guard Cory Joseph, who will be the 15th man on the bench while offering a veteran presence in the locker room. If Joseph sees significant playing time, something’s gone wrong.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Magic are poised to return to the postseason and make some noise in a crowded Eastern Conference. Individual improvement will be crucial, but Orlando has the proper pieces to earn home-court advantage in the playoffs, make an appearance in the second round and possibly even find its way to the conference finals on the backs of Banchero, Franz Wagner and Suggs. The Magic are young, hungry and ready to win even more under a charismatic leader in Mosley, who once again should be in the conversation for NBA Coach of the Year.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Miami	7:30
Oct. 25	Brooklyn	7:00
Oct. 26	at Memphis	8:00
Oct. 28	Indiana	7:00
Oct. 30	at Chicago	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 3	at Dallas	7:30
Nov. 4	at Oklahoma City	9:15
Nov. 6	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 8	New Orleans	7:00
Nov. 10	Washington	6:00
Nov. 12	Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 13	Indiana	7:00
Nov. 15	Philadelphia	7:00
Nov. 18	at Phoenix	9:00
Nov. 20	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 21	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Nov. 23	Detroit	7:00
Nov. 25	at Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 27	Chicago	7:00
Nov. 29	at Brooklyn	7:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Brooklyn	3:30
Dec. 3	at New York	7:30
Dec. 4	at Philadelphia	7:30
Dec. 6	at Philadelphia	7:00
Dec. 8	Phoenix	6:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	Oklahoma City	7:00
Dec. 21	Miami	7:00
Dec. 23	Boston	7:00
Dec. 26	Miami	7:00
Dec. 27	New York	7:00
Dec. 29	Brooklyn	3:30

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 3	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 5	Utah	6:30
Jan. 6	at New York	7:30
Jan. 9	Minnesota	7:00
Jan. 10	Milwaukee	7:00
Jan. 12	Philadelphia	6:00
Jan. 15	at Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 17	at Boston	7:00
Jan. 19	Denver	6:00
Jan. 21	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 23	Portland	7:00
Jan. 25	Detroit	7:00
Jan. 27	at Miami	7:30
Jan. 30	at Portland	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Utah	5:00
Feb. 3	at Golden State	10:00
Feb. 5	at Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 6	at Denver	9:00
Feb. 8	San Antonio	7:00
Feb. 10	Atlanta	7:00

Feb. 12	Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 20	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 21	Memphis	7:00
Feb. 23	Washington	6:00
Feb. 25	Cleveland	7:30
Feb. 27	Golden State	7:00

MARCH

March 2	Toronto	6:00
March 4	Toronto	7:00
March 8	at Milwaukee	8:00
March 10	at Houston	8:00
March 12	Chicago	7:00
March 14	at Minnesota	8:00
March 16	at Cleveland	6:00
March 17	at San Antonio	8:00
March 19	Houston	7:00
March 21	at Washington	7:00
March 24	L.A. Lakers	7:00
March 25	at Charlotte	7:00
March 27	Dallas	7:00
March 29	Sacramento	5:00
March 31	L.A. Clippers	7:00

APRIL

April 3	at Washington	7:00
April 6	at New Orleans	7:00
April 8	Atlanta	7:00
April 9	Boston	7:00
April 11	at Indiana	7:00
April 13	at Atlanta	1:00

All times Eastern



SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: 5TH

WAS WIZARDS

The Washington Wizards enter the 2024-25 season in Year 2 of an overdue rebuild under the front office leadership of Michael Winger and Will Dawkins. Even though the two are mutually collaborative, Winger focuses on the bigger picture for the organization, while Dawkins handles more of the Wizards' day-to-day operations as general manager. Next summer's draft will be flush with talent, so the Wizards likely will again rank near the top of the lottery odds and almost certainly not jockeying to sneak into the play-in tournament, which was the theme for the previous front office as instructed by ownership.

The upcoming season also marks Brian Keefe's first season as full-time head coach after being named to the interim role early in 2024. Winger, Dawkins and Keefe all overlapped to varying degrees in Oklahoma City under GM Sam Presti, and they hope to follow the Thunder's path of stockpiling draft picks and developing young talent on the way to championship contention.

FRONTCOURT

After a somewhat surprising signing, the Wizards frontcourt will be anchored by Jonas Valančiūnas at center, filling the shoes of Daniel Gafford, who was traded for Richaun Holmes and a first-round pick at last season's trade deadline. Fans will remember Valančiūnas on the Toronto Raptors early in his career facing off against Washington in the playoffs. The Lithuanian big man will provide the team with a durable rebounder, which has eluded the franchise in recent seasons. This allows Marvin Bagley III to shift back to a backup role with Holmes providing emergency depth as they return for a second season in Washington after midseason trades. None of the three is a part of the Wizards' long-term future, so it is a good bet at least one gets moved before the trade deadline.

The forward rotation largely will feature Kyle Kuzma, Bilal Coulibaly and Alex Sarr, all of whom are in quite different stages of their careers. Kuzma, who opted against a trade to Dallas at the last deadline, will be a potential target again for contenders as Washington seeks multiple first-round picks. The 29-year-old will be one of the higher-volume shooters for the Wizards, who lack players



JORDAN POOLE

SCOUTING THE WIZARDS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Did you know they haven't won 50 games since 1979? Coincidentally, that's the last time they went to the Finals. ... Neither of those things will be happening this year. ... (No. 2 pick) Alex Sarr is the player they're building around, and they should be better than last year just by bringing in Jonas Valančiūnas and Malcolm Brodgon. They now have some professionals in the locker room. ... Kyle Kuzma always plays hard and is undoubtedly their most talented guy. ... Brian Keefe quickly became a favorite as the interim coach. His connections with Kuzma and [Jordan] Poole is why he got the job full-time."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 25-47
DIVISION: 4TH

2020-21
Record: 34-38
DIVISION: 3RD

2021-22
Record: 35-47
DIVISION: 4TH

2022-23
Record: 35-47
DIVISION: 3RD

2023-24
Record: 15-67
DIVISION: 5TH

FROM LEFT: REGGIE HILDRED-USA TODAY SPORTS; RHONA WISE-USA TODAY SPORTS



KYLE KUZMA



BEYOND THE ARC

Best buds The continuing bromance between Jordan Poole and Bilal Coulibaly that tipped off as soon as the latter was drafted last year has continued, with the two going to a PSG soccer game in Coulibaly's native France this offseason.

Clothes horse Kyle Kuzma is constantly turning heads with his pre-game outfits, from the oversized pink sweater to a black puffer jacket with a large attached snood. It should be a treat to see how the onetime New York and Paris Fashion Week runway model levels up his style this season.

Playing big Corey Kispert (6-foot-6) is known for his 3-point shooting, but he has become extremely efficient at finishing in the restricted area. His 76 percent conversion percentage ranked sixth in the NBA last season (minimum 2.0 FGA/game) only behind players who stand at least 6-foot-9 (Dereck Lively II, James Wiseman, Kevin Durant, Giannis Antetokounmpo and Jalen Smith).

One of the good guys The re-signing of Anthony Gill, a career 3.6 points per game scorer, can easily appear as meaningless to an average NBA fan, but anyone in or around the organization can attest to his truly inspiring kindness and good nature that every locker room can use.



102.65

Washington led the NBA in pace last regular season at 102.65 possessions per 48 minutes, and that will continue to be a point of emphasis under head coach Brian Keefe's stewardship. The hope is to beat defenses in transition while also giving young players more possessions to develop.

Tristan Vukcevic, a 2023 second-round pick, is an intriguing talent with ability to stretch the floor at 6-foot-10, although he's on a two-way contract until roster spots can be cleared.

Washington's backcourt has a decent logjam even after assist-to-turnover ratio champion Tyus Jones chose not to re-sign with the Wizards, opting for Phoenix on a veteran's minimum contract once sign-and-trade options faded. Jordan Poole will continue as the primary ball-handler, a role in which he showed promise during the second half of the season. Poole is at his best when he is able to be creative with the ball, as he was for Golden State during its 2022 championship run. Washington looks to rebuild his value.

Malcolm Brogdon, a much better fit than Jones next to Poole because of his size and ability to defend, will play for his fourth team in the past four seasons. The 31-year-old looks to bounce back to a level of health that has eluded him for much of his career as he's exceeded 56 games just once in the past five sea-

OFFSEASON MOVES

1. Alex Sarr
PF, 7-0, 205, Perth Wildcats
(Australia)

1. Carlton “Bub” Carrington
PG, 6-6, 190, Pittsburgh

1. Kyshawn George
SF, 6-8, 200, Miami (Fla.)

Sarr basically forced his way to D.C. by not working out for the Hawks, who held the No. 1 overall pick. Carrington wowed in a late private workout, leading to a surprise trade minutes before the draft started.

Jonas Valančiūnas and Malcolm Brogdon will provide veteran leadership as Washington desires to establish a hard-working culture.

[illegible]



MALCOLM BROGDON

sons. When healthy, he has shown steady two-way play, but the Wizards are also eager to add his character and leadership, which are exemplified by his five years and counting as vice president of the players union.

Corey Kispert enters a contract year that will likely see him in a sixth-man role, where he can have a greater shot volume from beyond the arc or cutting to the basket. Kispert knows his defense needs improvement; he admitted as much at media day before last season. We will see if another summer of offseason work makes him less of a target on that end of the floor.

Possibly the most exciting part of the backcourt rotation will be rookie Carlton “Bub” Carrington, who hails from nearby Baltimore and is fresh off second-team All-Summer League honors in Las Vegas. The only lock guard for the 2025-26 Wizards roster, Carrington has the potential to be the franchise’s point guard of the future and an answer at a position that has had only questions since John Wall’s injury in 2018. Should Carrington not be ready to play backup point guard immediately as a rookie, which is perfectly understandable, look for Jared Butler to fill the role backing up Poole.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Even though Washington has quality players who could be in a playoff team’s rotation, the win total for 2024-25 may not even eclipse the 15-67 record put up last season. Many of the veteran talents (Kuzma, Brogdon, Valančiūnas and/or Kispert) could be shipped out for draft capital by the February trade deadline. With the future destinations of potential No. 1 picks Cooper Flagg, Airious “Ace” Bailey and other promising talents at stake, the Wizards will strategically ensure strong lottery odds. It still comes down to luck — with a mere 14 percent chance at the No. 1 overall pick even if they have the worst record in the NBA — but they will position themselves to slide the least in the 2025 and ’26 drafts.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 24	Boston	7:00
Oct. 26	Cleveland	7:00
Oct. 28	at Atlanta	7:30
Oct. 30	Atlanta	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Miami	9:30
Nov. 4	Golden State	7:15
Nov. 8	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 10	at Orlando	6:00
Nov. 11	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 13	at San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 15	at Atlanta	7:30
Nov. 17	Detroit	6:00
Nov. 18	at New York	7:30
Nov. 22	Boston	7:00
Nov. 24	at Indiana	5:00
Nov. 26	Chicago	7:00
Nov. 27	L.A. Clippers	7:00
Nov. 30	at Milwaukee	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 3	at Cleveland	7:00
Dec. 5	Dallas	7:00
Dec. 7	Denver	7:00
Dec. 8	Memphis	7:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 21	at Milwaukee	8:00

Dec. 23	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Dec. 26	Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 28	New York	7:00
Dec. 30	New York	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Chicago	7:00
Jan. 3	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 5	New Orleans	6:00
Jan. 7	Houston	7:00
Jan. 8	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 10	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 12	Oklahoma City	6:00
Jan. 13	Minnesota	7:00
Jan. 16	Phoenix	7:30
Jan. 18	at Golden State	8:30
Jan. 19	at Sacramento	9:00
Jan. 21	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 23	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 25	at Phoenix	9:00
Jan. 27	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 29	Toronto	7:00
Jan. 30	L.A. Lakers	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 3	at Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 5	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 7	Cleveland	7:00
Feb. 8	Atlanta	7:00
Feb. 10	San Antonio	7:00
Feb. 12	Indiana	7:00
Feb. 21	Milwaukee	7:00

Feb. 23	at Orlando	6:00
Feb. 24	Brooklyn	7:00
Feb. 26	Portland	7:00

MARCH

March 1	at Charlotte	6:00
March 3	at Miami	7:30
March 5	Utah	7:00
March 8	at Toronto	7:30
March 10	at Toronto	7:30
March 11	at Detroit	7:00
March 13	at Detroit	7:00
March 15	at Denver	9:00
March 16	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
March 18	at Portland	10:00
March 21	Orlando	7:00
March 22	at New York	8:00
March 24	Toronto	7:00
March 26	at Philadelphia	7:00
March 27	Indiana	7:00
March 29	Brooklyn	7:00
March 31	Miami	7:00

APRIL

April 2	Sacramento	7:00
April 3	Orlando	7:00
April 6	at Boston	6:00
April 8	at Indiana	7:00
April 9	Philadelphia	7:00
April 11	at Chicago	8:00
April 13	at Miami	1:00

All times Eastern

WESTERN CONFERENCE NOTES



CONFERENCE POWER RANKINGS

- 1. OKLAHOMA CITY** There's a Thunder warning out West.
- 2. DALLAS** Luka-led Mavs will vie for another conference title.
- 3. MINNESOTA** Hype is building in the North Star State.
- 4. DENVER** Conference semis loss left a bitter taste.
- 5. MEMPHIS** Griz hopes come down to Ja Morant's health.
- 6. NEW ORLEANS** Dejounte Murray arrives to fill the stat sheet.
- 7. PHOENIX** Mike Budenholzer brings a winning pedigree.
- 8. SACRAMENTO** DeMar DeRozan joins a solid core.
- 9. L.A. CLIPPERS** Paul George's departure clips L.A.'s wings.
- 10. GOLDEN STATE** Chef Curry has some new ingredients.
- 11. L.A. LAKERS** Look for possible LeBron/Bronny collabs.
- 12. HOUSTON** Reed Sheppard brings new hope to Clutch City.
- 13. SAN ANTONIO** It's Season 2 of the Wemby Show.
- 14. UTAH** Lauri Markkanen hits the right notes for lowly Jazz.
- 15. PORTLAND** Rip City pride will be tested again.

ALL-WESTERN CONFERENCE PRESEASON TEAM



FIRST TEAM

Devin Booker	PG/SG	Phoenix
Luka Dončić	SG	Dallas
Kevin Durant	PF	Phoenix
S. Gilgeous-Alexander	PG/SG	OK City
Nikola Jokić	C	Denver

SECOND TEAM

Anthony Edwards	SG	Minnesota
Kawhi Leonard	SF	L.A. Clippers
Ja Morant	PG	Memphis
Victor Wembanyama	C	San Antonio
Zion Williamson	PF	New Orleans

THIRD TEAM

Stephen Curry	PG	Golden State
Anthony Davis	PF/C	L.A. Lakers
De'Aaron Fox	PG	Sacramento
LeBron James	SF/PF	L.A. Lakers
Jalen Williams	PF/SG	Oklahoma City

ALL-ROOKIE TEAM

Stephon Castle	PG	San Antonio
Donovan Clingan	C	Portland
Rob Dillingham	PG/SG	Minnesota
Zach Edey	C	Memphis
Reed Sheppard	SG/PG	Houston

COACHES ON THE RISE

CHRIS FINCH, MINNESOTA

Finch's team has its sights set higher after eliminating the defending-champion Nuggets in last season's conference semifinals.

MARK DAIGNEAULT, OKLAHOMA CITY Daigneault's unconventional style is perfect in today's NBA. He has a title in his future.

JASON KIDD, DALLAS The Hall of Fame player is building an impressive résumé as a head coach.



CHRIS FINCH

COACHES ON THE HOT SEAT

CHAUNCEY BILLUPS, PORTLAND

He's hampered by his roster, but the Billups experiment in Portland doesn't seem to be working.

WILLIE GREEN, NEW ORLEANS

A first-round sweep after the play-in tournament last season took the air out of the balloon.

JJ REDICK, L.A. LAKERS

By Redick's own admission, a Lakers coach's seat is perpetually hot. No honeymoon here.



CHAUNCEY BILLUPS

TIME TO SHINE

JONATHAN KUMINGA, GOLDEN STATE

As a 19-year-old rookie, Kuminga became the second-youngest NBA champion in history. Now he's a franchise cornerstone.

TREY MURPHY III, NEW ORLEANS A runner-up finish in the 2024 Slam Dunk Contest showcased his uncommon athleticism.

CHRISTIAN BRAUN, DENVER Braun is history's fifth player to win a college national championship (Kansas in 2022) and NBA championship (Denver in 2023) in back-to-back seasons.



JONATHAN KUMINGA

SLIDING BACK

CHRIS PAUL, SAN ANTONIO

CP3 came off the bench in his lone season in Golden State, a clear signal that the end is in sight.

RUSSELL WESTBROOK, DENVER

Russ is playing for his sixth franchise in the last eight seasons and is coming off career lows in scoring average and assists.

BRADLEY BEAL, PHOENIX

He's still productive when healthy, but Beal hasn't played in more than 60 games in any of the last five seasons.



CHRIS PAUL



UNDER-THE-RADAR SIGNINGS

TYUS JONES (SUNS) Getting Jones on the minimum was the best value signing of the summer. He's a quality starter at point guard.

NAJI MARSHALL (MAVERICKS) Nicknamed "The Knife" for his Swiss Army-style versatility, Marshall will play good defense on the wing and hit open 3-pointers.



GROSSLY OVERPAID

BRADLEY BEAL (\$50.2 MILLION, SUNS) Beal is the fifth-highest-paid player in the league, but only ranks around 50-75 in the league at this point. His health and defensive focus are huge question marks.

ANDREW WIGGINS (\$26.3 MILLION, WARRIORS) Wiggins has lost his shooting touch and has gone from the team's best perimeter defender to a defensive liability.



SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **1st**

DAL MAVERICKS

Expectations for the Mavericks are high after making the NBA Finals last season. They will always have a shot to win any series with Luka Dončić, and they’ve built a supporting cast that’s good enough to make another deep playoff run.

Is this team better than last season’s squad? The Mavericks would argue yes — Klay Thompson is the shiny new name they hope will get them over the top. Another year to build chemistry between Dončić and Kyrie Irving should also help matters.

The Western Conference is more loaded than ever. The Thunder have made significant improvements and will be the favorite to win the West. But the Mavericks aren’t far behind, and they’re about as good as anyone — on paper.

FRONTCOURT

Daniel Gafford started the most games at center for the Mavericks after being acquired at the trade deadline, displacing Dereck Lively II in the rotation. Gafford is a good shot-blocker and finisher, but he’s not holding onto that starting spot for long. Lively will be the starter at some point in the season. Once he earns that job, it will be his for many years.

Lively is only 20 years old, but he plays beyond his years. Like Gafford, he’s a great leaper who can block shots and dunk at a prodigious rate. He’s also a better passer, which is vital when Dončić gets double-teamed in pick-and-rolls. And Lively showed a flash of 3-point shooting in the NBA Finals, which Gafford doesn’t offer.

Head coach Jason Kidd also can throw different looks at teams with Maxi Kleber, who can stretch the floor out and move his feet a little bit better on the perimeter. Longtime Mav Dwight Powell can play spot minutes in a limited role.

Alongside Lively will be skilled forward P.J. Washington, who learned how to play in Dallas’ winning environment after spending the early years of his career on bad Charlotte Hornets teams. The Mavericks challenged him to defend after acquiring him at the trade deadline, and he did it better than ever. He’s also a versatile offensive player who can score inside and out.

Thompson will effectively play the small forward spot.



KYRIE IRVING

SCOUTING THE MAVS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

“They were just completely overmatched in the NBA Finals, as it became Luka Dončić and Kyrie Irving against the world. ... Klay Thompson is past his prime, but he can still knock down shots, and that was something they really lacked in the Finals. ... P.J. Washington and Daniel Gafford were excellent pickups at the (trade) deadline. I think a full year with both of them will only make the entire team better. ... On paper, I don’t know if the Mavericks are better than Denver and Minnesota, yet they’re defending Western Conference champs. I don’t see any reason they can’t emerge again.”

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 43-32
DIVISION: 2ND

2020-21
Record: 42-30
DIVISION: 1ST

2021-22
Record: 52-30
DIVISION: 2ND

2022-23
Record: 38-44
DIVISION: 3RD

2023-24
Record: 50-32
DIVISION: 1ST

FROM LEFT: PETER CASEY-USA TODAY SPORTS; PETER CASEY-USA TODAY SPORTS



LUKA DONČIĆ



BEYOND THE ARC

Coach Kyrie Luka Dončić has praised how much he's learned from Kyrie Irving ever since Irving joined the team in February 2023. That includes how to win in the postseason. When Dončić revealed he was feeling tired in the closing minutes of Game 3 of the Western Conference finals, Irving responded: "You're supposed to be."

New team, new number Klay Thompson wore No. 11 for the Warriors, but that number is taken by Irving. Thompson decided to switch to No. 31, citing Mavericks fan favorite Jason Terry, a key member of the 2011 title team. "I got my new threads, No. 31 just like the Jet. He got a chip in the same number, and that's what I plan to do."

Ice-cold take Kyle Kuzma almost was traded to the Mavericks but chose to stay with the hapless Wizards. He gave his reasoning later in the year, stating, "There's only like three or four contenders — true contenders," excluding Dallas from that group. The Wizards finished with the second-worst record in the league.

The power of friendship Former Maverick Derrick Jones Jr. revealed the secret to the team's great chemistry on the floor last season: "We go over to each other's houses, we chill, kick back, eat food, pretty much what normal friends do. We go bowling, go out, just chill, go to movies. We just enjoy spending time with each other."



The Mavericks improved their depth at the wing by acquiring Naji Marshall and Quentin Grimes in the offseason. Both are good defenders and 3-point shooters who slot in well next to Dončić as quality role players.

This might finally be the year that Dončić wins the NBA MVP award. He led the league in scoring at 33.9 points per game last season and dropped 73 points in a game against the Hawks. That still was only good enough to earn him a third-place finish in the MVP voting.

There's no defense that can slow down Dončić. He's too good of a scorer one-on-one, and too brilliant of a passer if teams try to bring an extra defender onto him. He's a savant on the floor, and he's going to be even hungrier to win after getting so close last season.

Irving is 32, but he still looks as sharp as ever. His six dunks last season were the most of his career. He's got arguably the best handle in the game, and he's one of the best shooters in the league. But health is always a question mark for Irving. However, when they're both available, Irving and Dončić make up the best backcourt in the league.

If Irving does miss time, then the Mavericks have new addition Spencer Dinwiddie available. Dinwiddie played well in his previous Mavericks stint a few years ago, averaging 17.1 points per game for the team as the starter next to Dončić over parts of two seasons.

Dončić has dragged his teams to the postseason over and over, only to fall short due to exhaustion, injuries and a lack of talent around him. He was not near

21-9

The Dallas Mavericks' NBA Finals run may have come as a surprise given that they entered the playoffs without home-court advantage in any of their series. But their record was 21-9 after remaking their team at the trade deadline, ranking third overall in the league during that stretch. They were better than their 50-32 record indicated.

OFFSEASON MOVES

2. Melvin Ajinça
F, 6-8, 214, Saint-Quentin
Basketball (France)

The Mavericks did not have a first-round pick. They traded for the No. 51 pick in the second round, acquiring Ajinça from the New York Knicks in exchange for their own No. 58 pick and cash. Ajinça is a promising high-floor forward who has an NBA-ready body.

Dallas acquired **Klay Thompson** and Quintin Grimes via trade. Thompson remains a dangerous shooter. They also signed wing Naji Marshall and former Maverick Spencer Dinwiddie.

[illegible]



P.J. WASHINGTON

100 percent during last season’s NBA Finals, although not many players are. He should have less strain on his body with better teammates this season.

Thompson isn’t nearly the same player he was during the Warriors dynasty. But he is still a significant talent upgrade over previous starter Derrick Jones Jr., who was left wide open during the NBA Finals. Good luck using that strategy with Thompson. He will make teams pay when given even a sliver of breathing room.

Don’t discount the smaller moves the Mavs made, either. Dončić is at his best when surrounded by players who can mask his defensive shortcomings and punish teams from outside. He has more of those types of teammates now.

Marshall and Grimes are perfect in that role. Kleber was also trying to grind his way through a shoulder injury during the playoffs and was ineffective because of it. He should be able to hit 3-pointers again and move his feet well as a more switchable big man.

The Mavericks’ coaching also has gotten stronger over time. Kidd was criticized early in his Dallas tenure, but he’s become a fine in-game tactician and looks to have buy-in from his star players. Just like players, coaches can improve. Kidd has learned how to get this team clicking on all cylinders.

Another thing going for the Mavericks is that they have an easy avenue to improve. The 2025 draft looks fantastic, and Dallas has its pick available to trade. Given how aggressive the Mavericks were last year, it wouldn’t be a surprise to see them try to use that selection to upgrade even more come February.

Given that the Mavericks have gotten better, they have a great shot at re-turning to the NBA Finals. Still, the Western Conference is so stacked that it’s going to take a bit of luck again. But if fully healthy, this team is just as good as the Denver Nuggets, Oklahoma City Thunder, Minnesota Timberwolves, or anyone else. They should be a top-four seed in the West this season and make it deep into the playoffs.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 24	San Antonio	7:30
Oct. 26	at Phoenix	10:00
Oct. 28	Utah	8:30
Oct. 29	at Minnesota	7:30
Oct. 31	Houston	8:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 3	Orlando	7:30
Nov. 4	Indiana	9:45
Nov. 6	Chicago	8:30
Nov. 8	Phoenix	7:30
Nov. 10	at Denver	8:00
Nov. 12	at Golden State	10:00
Nov. 14	at Utah	9:00
Nov. 16	San Antonio	8:30
Nov. 17	at Oklahoma City	7:00
Nov. 19	New Orleans	8:30
Nov. 22	at Denver	10:00
Nov. 24	at Miami	6:00
Nov. 25	at Atlanta	7:30
Nov. 27	New York	7:30
Nov. 30	at Utah	9:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Portland	9:00
Dec. 3	Memphis	8:30
Dec. 5	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 7	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	L.A. Clippers	8:30
Dec. 21	L.A. Clippers	8:30
Dec. 23	Portland	8:30
Dec. 25	Minnesota	2:30
Dec. 27	at Phoenix	9:00
Dec. 28	at Portland	10:00
Dec. 30	at Sacramento	10:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Houston	8:00
Jan. 3	Cleveland	8:30
Jan. 6	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 7	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Jan. 9	Portland	8:30
Jan. 12	Denver	3:00
Jan. 14	Denver	9:30
Jan. 15	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 17	Oklahoma City	8:30
Jan. 20	at Charlotte	12:00
Jan. 22	Minnesota	7:30
Jan. 23	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 25	Boston	5:30
Jan. 27	Washington	8:30
Jan. 29	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 31	at Detroit	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at Cleveland	3:30
Feb. 4	at Philadelphia	7:30
Feb. 6	at Boston	7:30
Feb. 8	Houston	3:00
Feb. 10	Sacramento	8:30
Feb. 12	Golden State	9:30

Feb. 13	Miami	8:30
Feb. 21	New Orleans	9:30
Feb. 23	at Golden State	3:30
Feb. 25	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Feb. 27	Charlotte	8:30

MARCH

March 1	Milwaukee	8:30
March 3	Sacramento	8:30
March 5	at Milwaukee	9:30
March 7	Memphis	7:30
March 9	Phoenix	3:30
March 10	at San Antonio	8:30
March 12	at San Antonio	8:00
March 14	at Houston	8:00
March 16	Philadelphia	1:00
March 19	at Indiana	7:00
March 21	Detroit	8:30
March 24	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 25	at New York	7:30
March 27	at Orlando	7:00
March 29	at Chicago	8:00
March 31	Brooklyn	8:30

APRIL

April 2	Atlanta	8:30
April 4	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
April 5	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
April 9	L.A. Lakers	7:30
April 11	Toronto	8:30
April 13	at Memphis	3:30

All times Eastern



SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **4TH**

HOU **ROCKETS**

Banners are not raised for sticking to a plan, but the Rockets did accomplish that to get this far. They endured three painful seasons after the James Harden era to hoard cap space and restock their collection of draft assets. They loaded up on young talent and spent their cap allowance to rise to last season's 41-41 record.

Now, they will seek bona fide success rather than merely strides in that direction. There are reasons to believe the plan will pan out. The six players chosen in the first phase of the rebuild — Jalen Green, Alperen Şengün, Jabari Smith Jr., Tari Eason, Amen Thompson and Cam Whitmore — all have shown promise. The Rockets are at least as high on this season's addition, Reed Sheppard, the third player taken in the draft.

Promise, however, is not the point. The Rockets have reached the stage that they need to see that potential fulfilled. Importantly, they also need to inform the decision-making that must come with a roster filled with players closing in on their second contracts.

The Rockets also will need to see how the pieces all fit. Şengün was sensational in the early months of the season when Green struggled. Green was phenomenal in March, with most of Houston's 11-game winning streak coming when Şengün was out. And as vital as both are to what the Rockets hope to be, Houston's rotation will evolve even without a significant free-agent addition.

The Rockets will add Steven Adams to the rotation and get Eason back after he was limited to just 22 games by injury. Last season's rookies, Whitmore and especially Thompson, seem ready for greater roles. Houston might seek to fit in Sheppard somewhere, despite returning every member of last season's rotation. Head coach Ime Udoka has shown that he will play or bench anyone as results demand.

FRONT COURT

The Rockets' best stretch last season came almost entirely with Şengün out, but that does not make him any less important to their plans. If anything, they need to find a way to be their best when he is at his best, adding his reliable scoring and rebounding to what they did so well with



REED SHEPPARD

SCOUTING THE ROCKETS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I think they did the wise thing by just staying the course this summer. ... Ime Udoka really got them to another level. I'd give them the edge over the Warriors for a play-in spot this season. ... Fred VanVleet and Dillon Brooks proved to be even better than a lot of people assumed they'd be. They helped with the improvement of guys like Jalen Green, Jabari Smith and especially Alperen Şengün. ... They could ascend rapidly if Reed Sheppard proves to be an immediate contributor, Amen Thompson improves and Steven Adams gets close to back to his old self."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 44-28
DIVISION: 1ST

2020-21
Record: 17-55
DIVISION: 5TH

2021-22
Record: 20-62
DIVISION: 5TH

2022-23
Record: 22-60
DIVISION: 4TH

2023-24
Record: 41-41
DIVISION: 3RD

FROM LEFT: LUCAS PELTIER-USA TODAY SPORTS; PETRE THOMAS-USA TODAY SPORTS



ALPEREN ŞENGÜN



BEYOND THE ARC

Going for gold The Rockets had a smattering of representation in France for the Olympics, though their players in Paris did not make it to the medal round. Dillon Brooks was a key player for Canada one year after he helped lead a run to the World Cup bronze medal. He did not come close to matching the 39 points he scored in that win against the United States and misfired in the knockout round in Paris, but he averaged 11.3 points and made 46.2 percent of his 3-pointers in the Olympic tournament. Jock Landale averaged 14.5 points on 62.5 percent shooting and 8.8 rebounds for Australia. Jack McVeigh, signed to a two-way contract shortly before the tournament, averaged 9.5 points, making 52.5 percent of his 3s for the Australian team. The Rockets did have a representative make it past the knockout round — head trainer Jason Biles serves as a USA Basketball senior national team trainer.

Gold-adjacent The Rockets did not have anyone on Team USA, but they did have two players in camp in Las Vegas. Jabari Smith Jr. and Amen Thompson played for the select team that scrimmaged against the national team, just as Jalen Green had done last summer. Both drew raves from select team coaches Jamahl Mosely and Jim Boylen, with Thompson especially turning heads with his forceful, physical playmaking.



Green leading them and Thompson in the starting lineup in Şengün's absence.

Şengün is not a rim runner, but he is effective as the target for pocket passes, which fits well with point guard Fred VanVleet and was an area of growth for Green. Şengün's reliable mid-range shot, including his version of a Dirk Nowitzki-style one-legged jumper, and his deft passing could work well in that role. That would unlock opportunities for Green, VanVleet and possibly Sheppard on the perimeter.

The Rockets, however, need Şengün to defend as he did early in the season. Adding Adams could help with that. If Adams is healthy and back at his best, Şengün will have to defend with the same focus he brings to the offensive end to be the choice to finish games, with Udoka having shown he will close with the combinations that work best.

Adams' powerful screen-setting has long helped perimeter scorers. But he is better known for his impact on the offensive boards, where his force could open things for Eason, Thompson and Smith.

Eason's return can be an overlooked part of the Rockets' plans, but the Rockets believe he has as much two-way potential as their more celebrated young talent. They likely will want to get him consistent minutes by having him play at both forward spots.

Houston can open more playing time for him by having Smith work as a backup center in some matchups, as he did when Şengün was injured. But that is complicated, too, with Adams in the mix and with Jock Landale playing well in the final months of the season.

With Dillon Brooks so valuable to the Rockets defense, there are not a lot of backup minutes at small forward. If Eason claims many of them, Whitmore again could have difficulty carving out a role, unless at backup shooting guard.

Veteran forward Jeff Green returns, with Udoka having shown great trust in Green to take on some of the toughest defensive assignments.

BACKCOURT

The Rockets bring back their starting backcourt of VanVleet and Jalen Green, along with their outstanding first-round pick from last season, Thompson, and



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

1. Reed Sheppard
G , 6-3, 185, Kentucky

Sheppard looked the part at the start of summer league play, excelling at getting his own shot and setting up others in pick-and-roll. He was on the ball much more than when at Kentucky, showing promise to run the point.

Other newcomers

The Rockets used their other pick, a second rounder via Golden State (No. 44), to acquire **AJ Griffin** in a three-team trade. The Rockets also signed N'Faly Dante, an undrafted free agent center out of Oregon, and Jack McVeigh, a shooting forward who was the MVP of Australia's NBL Finals, to two-way contracts.

ROSTER										2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: IME UDOKA (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 92-72)																						
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS			
28	Alperen Şengün	C	6-11	243	7/25/02	Besiktas	3	63	32.5	.537	.297	.693	9.3	5.0	21.1		13.8	7.3	31.2			
4	Jalen Green	G	6-4	186	2/09/02	G League Ignite	3	82	31.7	.423	.332	.804	5.2	3.5	19.6		7.8	5.4	29.7			
5	Fred VanVleet	G	6-0	197	2/25/94	Wichita State	8	73	36.8	.416	.387	.860	3.8	8.1	17.4		5.0	10.5	22.7			
10	Jabari Smith Jr.	F	6-11	220	5/13/03	Auburn	2	76	31.9	.454	.363	.811	8.1	1.6	13.7		12.2	2.4	20.7			
9	Dillon Brooks	G/F	6-6	225	1/22/96	Oregon	7	72	30.9	.428	.359	.844	3.4	1.7	12.7		5.3	2.6	19.7			
7	Cam Whitmore	F	6-7	230	7/08/04	Villanova	1	47	18.7	.454	.359	.679	3.8	0.7	12.3		9.8	1.8	31.6			
17	Tari Eason	F	6-8	215	5/10/01	LSU	2	22	21.8	.466	.360	.636	7.0	1.2	9.8		15.3	2.7	21.5			
1	Amen Thompson	G/F	6-7	200	1/30/03	Overtime Elite	1	62	22.4	.536	.138	.684	6.6	2.6	9.5		14.1	5.6	20.5			
0	Aaron Holiday	G	6-0	185	9/30/96	UCLA	6	78	16.3	.446	.387	.921	1.6	1.8	6.6		4.7	5.3	19.4			
32	Jeff Green	F	6-8	235	8/28/86	Georgetown	16	78	16.8	.456	.331	.819	2.3	0.9	6.5		6.5	2.6	18.7			
2	Jock Landale	C	6-11	255	10/25/95	St. Mary's	3	56	13.6	.515	.250	.800	3.1	1.2	4.9		10.8	4.1	17.2			
8	Jae'Sean Tate	F	6-4	230	10/28/95	Ohio State	4	65	15.9	.472	.299	.667	3.0	1.0	4.1		9.2	3.0	12.3			
19	Nate Williams	G	6-5	205	2/12/99	Buffalo	2	22	5.9	.540	.400	.538	1.0	0.3	2.9		8.5	2.6	23.4			
14	AJ Griffin	F	6-6	220	8/25/03	Duke	2	20	8.5	.290	.256	1.000	0.9	0.3	2.4		5.1	1.4	13.5			
12	Steven Adams	C	6-11	265	7/20/93	Pittsburgh	10	Injured — Missed Season														
	N'Faly Dante	C	7-0	230	10/19/01	Oregon		R — First NBA Season														
	Jack McVeigh	G/F	6-8	215	6/27/96	Nebraska-Lincoln		R — First NBA Season														
15	Reed Sheppard	G	6-3	185	6/24/04	Kentucky		R — First NBA Season														



JALEN GREEN

prized selection this season, Sheppard. That does not mean there are no questions.

They will need to find out if the March version of Jalen Green is the real Green. He was sensational as the Rockets went 13-2 that month, averaging 27.7 points on 49.2 percent shooting, with the Rockets outscoring opponents by 11.3 points when he was on the floor.

The Rockets believe he can excel while playing with Şengün, and he had begun to get it going before Şengün went down in Sacramento. But they need to see that for a longer stretch.

They know what they can get from VanVleet, who gave them the steady hand and disruptive defense they wanted at the point. But Thompson was his best offensively when playing in the dunker’s spot or as a rim runner. They will want him to man the point, putting his outstanding point of attack defense on the floor with the switchability of some combination of Brooks, Eason and Smith. That would allow him to play with VanVleet or Green. Udoka might have to figure out how to get minutes for Whitmore and Sheppard, shooters who can be especially valuable playing with Thompson, who does not shoot well from the perimeter.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Rockets’ depth, mixing young talent with dependable veterans in Brooks, VanVleet and Adams, gives Houston a team that could hold its own with the starters and pull away with reserves. The hope, however, is that stars will emerge from those seven players taken in the initial phases of the rebuild. Promising as those players might be, none has been an All-Star. Depth is nice and valuable, but eventually, success is built on star power.

The Rockets should be encouraged by their late-season push to a 41-41 record, but they also remained well off the pace, and they will not improve by as many wins as they did last season.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Charlotte	8:00
Oct. 25	Memphis	8:00
Oct. 26	at San Antonio	8:30
Oct. 28	at San Antonio	8:00
Oct. 31	at Dallas	8:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Golden State	8:00
Nov. 4	New York	8:45
Nov. 6	San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 8	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Nov. 10	at Detroit	3:00
Nov. 11	Washington	8:00
Nov. 13	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Nov. 15	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Nov. 17	at Chicago	7:00
Nov. 18	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 20	Indiana	8:00
Nov. 22	Portland	8:00
Nov. 23	Portland	8:00
Nov. 26	at Minnesota	8:00
Nov. 27	at Philadelphia	7:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Oklahoma City	7:00
Dec. 3	at Sacramento	10:00
Dec. 5	at Golden State	10:00
Dec. 8	at L.A. Clippers	9:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 22	at Toronto	6:00
Dec. 23	at Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 26	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 27	Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 29	Miami	7:00
Jan. 1	Dallas	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 3	Boston	8:00
Jan. 5	L.A. Lakers	7:00
Jan. 7	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 9	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 11	at Atlanta	3:00
Jan. 13	Memphis	8:00
Jan. 15	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 16	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 18	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 20	Detroit	2:00
Jan. 22	Cleveland	7:30
Jan. 25	at Cleveland	7:30
Jan. 27	at Boston	7:30
Jan. 30	at Memphis	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Brooklyn	8:00
Feb. 3	at New York	7:30
Feb. 4	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 6	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 8	at Dallas	3:00
Feb. 9	Toronto	2:00
Feb. 12	Phoenix	8:30
Feb. 13	Golden State	8:00

Feb. 21	Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 22	at Utah	9:30
Feb. 25	Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 26	San Antonio	9:30

MARCH

March 1	Sacramento	8:00
March 3	at Oklahoma City	8:00
March 4	at Indiana	7:00
March 6	at New Orleans	8:00
March 8	New Orleans	7:00
March 10	Orlando	8:00
March 12	Phoenix	8:00
March 14	Dallas	8:00
March 15	Chicago	8:00
March 17	Philadelphia	8:00
March 19	at Orlando	7:00
March 21	at Miami	8:00
March 23	Denver	7:00
March 25	Atlanta	8:00
March 27	at Utah	9:00
March 30	at Phoenix	9:00
March 31	at L.A. Lakers	10:30

APRIL

April 2	Utah	8:00
April 4	Oklahoma City	8:00
April 6	at Golden State	8:30
April 9	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
April 11	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
April 13	Denver	3:30

All times Eastern



SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: 2ND

MEM GRIZZLIES

In 2024-25, the Memphis Grizzlies will be asked to prove themselves all over again. A flurry of injuries derailed Memphis last season and ended a three-year postseason run for superstar point guard Ja Morant and Co. It also added a layer of mystery around the Grizzlies as they aim to reclaim their spot among the Western Conference contenders.

Is Memphis still a formidable threat, or have the other surging young teams passed them during their period of turmoil? The answer to that question may hang on the shoulders of a rookie.

FRONTCOURT

The Grizzlies bet big on a young big man during the off-season, spending the No. 9 overall pick in the NBA Draft on 7-foot-4 center and two-time National Player of the Year Zach Edey of Purdue. Edey immediately becomes the tallest player in franchise history and a soon-to-be opening-night starter. He was exactly the style of center the franchise was searching for — a gigantic player cut from the archetype of Steven Adams, whom Memphis dealt to Houston at the trade deadline last season. Adams maximized the production of the stars around him by setting screens to create space for Morant offensively and gobbling up space defensively to allow shot-blocker Jaren Jackson Jr. to roam the paint. It will now be Edey's turn to mimic that role while also adding an element of around-the-rim offensive skill that Adams lacked.

It is a pressure-packed situation, especially when you consider that Edey was the only major change the Grizzlies made to their roster during the offseason. Yet, it doesn't feel that way. Factor in the news that forward Brandon Clarke is ready for his first full season since tearing his Achilles in March 2023, and the frontcourt feels rejuvenated.

It does mean, however, that head coach Taylor Jenkins has some sorting to do.

Both Clarke and Edey are non-shooters, meaning Jenkins isn't likely to play them together to preserve floor spacing. This version of the Grizzlies has struggled to score in half-court settings for several seasons in a row and likely will look to use combinations that include four 3-point shooters on the court at once.



JAREN JACKSON JR.

SCOUTING THE GRIZZLIES

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"It's hard to believe they finished with the second-best record in the West just two seasons ago. A lot has happened since. ... There are tons of question marks, but it all centers around Ja Morant. If he's healthy and the same, they have some nice pieces. ... Jaren Jackson Jr. was already pretty good and got a chance to really shine in Morant's absence. That should only benefit Memphis this year. ... It will be interesting to see if Zach Edey can make an impact right away. He could either be a complete steal or a bust. ... To me, they are the league's biggest mystery entering the season."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 34-39
DIVISION: 3RD

2020-21
Record: 38-34
DIVISION: 2ND

2021-22
Record: 56-26
DIVISION: 1ST

2022-23
Record: 51-31
DIVISION: 1ST

2023-24
Record: 27-55
DIVISION: 4TH

FROM LEFT: DANIEL DUNN-USA TODAY SPORTS; JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA-USA TODAY SPORTS



JA MORANT



BEYOND THE ARC

Gotta be the shoes After releasing his first signature sneaker in April 2023, Ja Morant and Nike are working toward the release of his second signature sneaker, the Ja 2. A model of the new shoe was presented to the point guard during his Hall of Fame induction at Murray State in July.

TwelveTime Morant is also coaching his Nike-branded AAU program TwelveTime, which features seventh- and eighth-graders. One of the teams happens to feature the son of fellow Grizzlies point guard Derrick Rose. Morant has spoken candidly about how the AAU programs have helped him recapture his joy after the turmoil that followed him the past two seasons.

Man of the world Jaren Jackson Jr. released a new rap album titled “777” and continued his fashion endeavors with a trip to Europe. He also traveled to Japan with league representatives in an effort to continue to grow the game in Asia.

Collector's items Jake LaRavia has become one of the most prominent NBA players in the trading card space. Following summer league, he went to the National Sports Card Convention in Cleveland. One lucky collector turned in one of LaRavia's signed cards for a \$5,000 bounty at a local card shop in Memphis last season. The Memphis forward is known to have sold some of his collection for close to \$30,000.



57.7

OFFSEASON MOVES

2. Cam Spencer
G, 6-4, 205, UConn

Spencer and Wells bring needed shooting to the Grizzlies but may not have a pathway to crack the rotation when the season begins. Edey figures to be an immediate starter for the Grizzlies after a decorated college career at Purdue. He and Spencer signed with the same agency and worked out together prior to the draft. Spencer's UConn team defeated Purdue in the national championship game.

ROSTER																48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY					
HEAD COACH: TAYLOR JENKINS (6TH SEASON; CAREER: 206-185)																2023-24 STATISTICS					
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS		
12	Ja Morant	G	6-2	174	8/10/99	Murray State	5	9	35.3	.471	.275	.813	5.6	8.1	25.1		7.5	11.0	34.1		
22	Desmond Bane	G	6-5	215	6/25/98	TCU	4	42	34.4	.464	.381	.870	4.4	5.5	23.7		6.2	7.7	33.2		
13	Jaren Jackson Jr.	F/C	6-10	242	9/15/99	Michigan State	6	66	32.2	.444	.320	.808	5.5	2.3	22.5		8.2	3.5	33.6		
45	GG Jackson II	F	6-9	210	12/17/04	South Carolina	1	48	25.7	.428	.357	.752	4.1	1.2	14.6		7.6	2.3	27.2		
36	Marcus Smart	G	6-3	220	3/06/94	Oklahoma State	10	20	30.2	.430	.313	.768	2.7	4.3	14.5		4.2	6.8	22.9		
1	Scotty Pippen Jr.	G	6-1	170	11/10/00	Vanderbilt	2	21	25.1	.493	.417	.745	3.2	4.7	12.9		6.1	8.9	24.7		
15	Brandon Clarke	F	6-8	215	9/19/96	Gonzaga	5	6	22.4	.559	.167	.143	5.3	1.5	11.3		11.4	3.2	24.3		
10	Luke Kennard	G	6-5	206	6/24/96	Duke	7	39	25.6	.448	.450	.889	2.9	3.5	11.0		5.4	6.5	20.6		
3	Jake LaRavia	F	6-7	235	11/03/01	Wake Forest	2	35	23.0	.389	.340	.826	3.7	1.7	10.8		7.6	3.5	22.6		
7	Santi Aldama	F/C	7-0	215	1/10/01	Loyola-Maryland	3	61	26.5	.435	.349	.621	5.8	2.3	10.7		10.4	4.1	19.4		
5	Vince Williams Jr.	G	6-4	205	8/30/00	VCU	2	52	27.6	.446	.378	.800	5.6	3.4	10.0		9.7	5.8	17.4		
23	Derrick Rose	G	6-3	200	10/04/88	Memphis	15	24	16.6	.461	.366	.889	1.9	3.3	8.0		5.4	9.4	23.0		
46	John Konchar	G	6-5	210	3/22/96	Purdue-Fort Wayne	5	55	21.3	.423	.317	.840	4.7	2.0	4.3		10.5	4.5	9.6		
21	Mamadi Diakite	F	6-9	228	1/21/97	Virginia	4	6	4.1	.667	.000	.667	0.7	0.3	2.0		7.9	3.9	23.6		
30	Jay Huff	C	7-1	240	8/25/97	Virginia	3	20	2.5	.600	.333	1.000	0.6	0.1	1.2		10.7	1.9	22.4		
	Zach Edey	C	7-4	305	5/14/02	Purdue		R — First NBA Season													
	Cam Spencer	G	6-4	205	4/06/00	Connecticut		R — First NBA Season													
	Jaylen Wells	F	6-8	205	8/26/03	Washington State		R — First NBA Season													



DESMOND BANE

Strategically, Jenkins may be tempted to slide 10-year veteran Smart — typically a point guard and a long-time starter — to the bench because it could allow him to use Smart as a ball-handler when Morant exits in the first quarter.

Bane may also assume some point guard duties, as he has done in previous seasons. He was on track to have his most productive season as a pro before suffering a severe ankle sprain in mid-January and missing more than six weeks of action.

The discovery of more young talent should help Memphis revitalize its scoring attack, but its overall success lies mostly in the hands of Morant.

Does the NBA remember just how great he can be at his zenith? This is a player who was the Rookie of the Year in 2019-20 and All-NBA in 2021-22. Morant has twice averaged more than 30 points across a playoff series, has 11 career triple-doubles and boasts 11 career 40-point games (including playoffs).

Yet Morant may be flying under the radar after playing just nine games last season due to a 25-game suspension and season-ending shoulder surgery. He will enter this season determined to reclaim his spot among the league’s elite and become the first Grizzlies player to win an MVP award.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Injuries derailed Memphis last season, but it won 50-plus games each of the previous two seasons with Morant in the fold. If the superstar point guard can stay healthy — and his explosive nature certainly puts that in question — the Grizzlies have assembled the talent around him to compete again.

Memphis’ front office also has positioned the roster for in-season trade possibilities that could be used to further bolster the roster. They project as a team that again could reach 50 wins and make the playoffs, even in a crowded Western Conference.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Utah	9:00
Oct. 25	at Houston	8:00
Oct. 26	Orlando	8:00
Oct. 28	Chicago	8:00
Oct. 30	Brooklyn	8:00
Oct. 31	Milwaukee	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Philadelphia	7:30
Nov. 4	at Brooklyn	8:00
Nov. 6	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Nov. 8	Washington	8:00
Nov. 10	at Portland	9:00
Nov. 13	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Nov. 15	at Golden State	10:00
Nov. 17	Denver	6:00
Nov. 19	Denver	8:00
Nov. 20	Philadelphia	8:00
Nov. 23	at Chicago	8:00
Nov. 25	Portland	8:00
Nov. 27	Detroit	8:00
Nov. 29	New Orleans	5:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Indiana	3:30
Dec. 3	at Dallas	8:30
Dec. 5	Sacramento	8:00
Dec. 7	at Boston	8:00
Dec. 8	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	Golden State	8:00
Dec. 21	at Atlanta	7:30
Dec. 23	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Dec. 26	Toronto	8:00
Dec. 27	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 29	at Oklahoma City	7:00
Dec. 31	at Phoenix	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 3	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 4	at Golden State	8:30
Jan. 6	Dallas	8:00
Jan. 9	Houston	8:00
Jan. 11	at Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 13	at Houston	8:00
Jan. 15	at San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 17	at San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 20	Minnesota	2:30
Jan. 22	Charlotte	8:00
Jan. 24	New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 25	Utah	8:00
Jan. 27	at New York	7:30
Jan. 30	Houston	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at Milwaukee	8:30
Feb. 3	San Antonio	8:00
Feb. 5	at Toronto	7:30
Feb. 8	Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 11	at Phoenix	10:00
Feb. 12	at L.A. Clippers	10:30

Feb. 20	at Indiana	7:00
Feb. 21	at Orlando	7:00
Feb. 23	at Cleveland	7:30
Feb. 25	Phoenix	8:00
Feb. 28	New York	8:00

MARCH

March 1	San Antonio	8:00
March 3	Atlanta	8:00
March 5	Oklahoma City	8:00
March 7	at Dallas	7:30
March 9	at New Orleans	7:00
March 10	Phoenix	8:00
March 12	Utah	8:00
March 14	Cleveland	8:00
March 15	Miami	8:00
March 17	at Sacramento	10:00
March 19	at Portland	10:00
March 21	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 25	at Utah	9:00
March 27	at Oklahoma City	8:00
March 29	L.A. Lakers	8:00
March 31	Boston	8:00

APRIL

April 1	Golden State	8:00
April 3	at Miami	7:30
April 5	at Detroit	7:00
April 8	at Charlotte	7:00
April 10	Minnesota	9:30
April 11	at Denver	9:00
April 13	Dallas	3:30

All times Eastern



SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

2 PELICANS



BRANDON INGRAM

SCOUTING THE PELICANS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I don't think Dejounte Murray puts them over the top, but he does make them better. ... They have a lot of really good players, but aside from Zion Williamson, I'm not sure they have anyone who's destined for greatness. ... That said, if they can pull it all together during the right time of the season, I think they're capable of making a Dallas-like run. Four of their spots are filled with incredibly talented players in Williamson, Brandon Ingram, CJ McCollum and Murray. ... I know there's a chance they trade Ingram before the season, but if that works itself out, they could surprise some people."

After his team got swept in the first round of the NBA playoffs, New Orleans Pelicans executive vice president David Griffin warned that there would be major shakeups coming to the roster. He followed through on that promise, trading for point guard Dejounte Murray of the Atlanta Hawks and letting longtime starting center Jonas Valančiūnas leave as a free agent.

More moves may still be in the works. Griffin has expressed reluctance about extending Brandon Ingram, who may not finish the season on the roster.

Even if the Pelicans stand pat, this is still a very good team that won 49 games last season and improved its talent base. Zion Williamson's shaky health will again determine their ceiling. But if everything breaks right, they could end up surprising a lot of people by being near the top of the Western Conference.

FRONT COURT

Do the Pelicans have a starting-caliber center on their roster? Does it matter? They will either make a trade for a starting center or play smaller and faster lineups for most of the year.

The Pelicans haven't bothered to replace Valančiūnas or his backup, Larry Nance Jr., who was part of the Murray trade. They're going into the season with raw rookie Yves Missi, past-his-prime veteran Daniel Theis and fringe NBA players Jeremiah Robinson-Earl and Trey Jemison as their center options. None of those guys are capable of playing big minutes.

Williamson certainly has the size to guard up in position. He's never been a great rebounder, but he's as strong as anyone in the league. He's impossible to stop when going downhill. Williamson's injuries and conditioning are constant sources of concern. But during the flashes where he is totally healthy, he has at times looked like an MVP candidate.

Ingram will be the starting small forward while he's still on the roster. The one-time All-Star is coming off a very disappointing postseason. He has a built-in excuse — he was trying to rush back from injury, and he is a much better player than he showed at the end of the year.

FROM LEFT: ALONZO ADAMS-USA TODAY SPORTS; ALLAN HENRY-USA TODAY SPORTS

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 30-42
DIVISION: 5TH

2020-21
Record: 31-41
DIVISION: 4TH

2021-22
Record: 36-46
DIVISION: 3RD

2022-23
Record: 42-40
DIVISION: 2ND

2023-24
Record: 49-33
DIVISION: 2ND



ZION WILLIAMSON



BEYOND THE ARC

Herb Jones fan club

Forwards Trey Murphy III and Herbert Jones are competing for minutes, but they are each other's biggest fans. After Jones was named to the All-Defensive team, Murphy changed his Twitter bio to read "President of the 'I told you Herb Jones is First team All Defense' Club."

Not on Herb Day Local politicians are getting in on the Jones hype. Louisiana governor Jeff Landry signed a proclamation last year declaring May 28 as "Not on Herb Day," cementing Jones' catch phrase into the legislative books.

Margaux, not Margot CJ McCollum has only been a Pelican for parts of three seasons, but he's already embraced the local culture. He and his wife chose to name their daughter Margaux rather than the more traditional Margot spelling to honor the French-Creole roots of the city.

Ruling the Kings Due to scheduling quirks, the Pelicans pulled off the rare feat of playing the Sacramento Kings six times outside of the playoffs last season. Amazingly, the Pelicans won all six, eliminating the Kings from both the in-season and play-in tournaments. It's a feat that may never be matched again.



Ingram is a great scorer and an improved passer who has garnered surprisingly little interest from other teams. That’s mostly due to the \$50 million-plus annually that he is hoping to get with his next contract.

Herbert Jones and Trey Murphy III will compete for that last frontcourt starting spot. Both are too good to come off the bench.

Jones is coming off an All-Defensive campaign in which he proved to be a total game-changer on that end of the floor. He’s also a much-improved 3-point shooter, hitting 41.8 percent of his looks last season.

Murphy is a good athlete and a lights-out volume 3-point shooter who has All-Star potential due to his scoring prowess. He’s an improved defender and has earned a much bigger role on the team, even though he was hampered by injuries early last season.

The competition between Jones and Murphy may result in both of them starting, leaving only one true guard in the starting lineup.

BACKCOURT

Murray is a lock to start at point guard after the Pelicans gave up a good package to get him from the Atlanta Hawks.

Murray was a second-team All-Defensive guard in 2017-18 and still gets a ton of steals, but he hasn’t been as locked in on the defensive end of the floor in recent years. He remains a good three-level scorer who will get a chance to do more after leaving a situation in which he never seemed to mesh with Trae Young.

CJ McCollum is the other incumbent starter. He was New Orleans’ best player on some nights and averaged 20.0 points per game. He’s still good enough to start, but he may be squeezed out and transition to a sixth man role as he enters his age-33 season.

Behind McCollum and Murray is Jose Alvarado, who brings energy and defense off the bench. The Pelicans’ Smoothie King Center (nicknamed “The Blender”) becomes electric whenever Alvarado checks in. Opponents need to be aware of Grand Theft Alvarado at all times. His penchant for hiding on the court to get steals has led to numerous viral clips over the years.

70

The Pelicans won 70 percent of the 70 games in which Zion Williamson appeared. That’s a 57-win pace, which would have tied them with the Oklahoma City Thunder and Denver Nuggets for the best record in the Western Conference last season.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

- 1. Yves Missi
C, 7-0, 235, Baylor
- 2. Antonio Reeves
G, 6-4, 205, Kentucky

The Pelicans bolstered their post depth by taking Missi with the 21st pick. The athletic big man averaged 10.7 points, 5.6 rebounds and 1.5 blocks as a freshman last season. The Pelicans then traded for Reeves, who was taken at No. 47. He’s an experienced guard and a great 3-point shooter.

Other Newcomers

The Pelicans’ big talent upgrade came via trade, acquiring Dejounte Murray from the Atlanta Hawks. The change of scenery should suit Murray, who was an uncomfortable fit in Atlanta with Trae Young.

ROSTER							2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: WILLIE GREEN (4TH SEASON; CAREER: 127-119)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
1	Zion Williamson	F	6-6	284	7/06/00	Duke	4	70	31.5	.570	.333	.702	5.8	5.0	22.9		8.8	7.7	34.8
5	Dejounte Murray	G	6-5	180	9/19/96	Washington	7	78	35.7	.459	.363	.794	5.3	6.4	22.5		7.2	8.7	30.2
14	Brandon Ingram	F	6-8	190	9/02/97	Duke	8	64	32.9	.492	.355	.801	5.1	5.7	20.8		7.4	8.3	30.4
3	CJ McCollum	G	6-3	190	9/19/91	Lehigh	11	66	32.7	.459	.429	.827	4.3	4.6	20.0		6.4	6.8	29.4
25	Trey Murphy III	F	6-8	206	6/18/00	Virginia	3	57	29.7	.443	.380	.815	4.9	2.2	14.8		8.0	3.5	23.9
2	Herbert Jones	F	6-7	206	10/06/98	Alabama	3	76	30.5	.498	.418	.867	3.6	2.6	11.0		5.6	4.1	17.3
24	Jordan Hawkins	G	6-5	190	4/29/02	Connecticut	1	67	17.3	.382	.366	.838	2.2	1.0	7.8		6.1	2.9	21.7
15	Jose Alvarado	G	6-0	179	4/12/98	Georgia Tech	3	56	18.4	.412	.377	.673	2.3	2.1	7.1		6.0	5.5	18.5
55	Trey Jemison	C	6-10	260	11/28/99	UAB	1	25	23.0	.551	.000	.840	5.4	1.1	6.8		11.2	2.3	14.3
10	Daniel Theis	F/C	6-8	245	4/04/92	Brose Bamberg	7	60	16.9	.532	.366	.760	4.1	1.0	6.3		11.5	2.9	17.8
37	Matt Ryan	F	6-6	215	4/17/97	Chattanooga	3	28	13.9	.434	.451	.929	1.4	0.6	5.4		4.9	2.2	18.7
8	Jamal Cain	F	6-6	191	3/20/99	Oakland	2	26	10.0	.430	.355	.783	1.4	0.4	3.7		6.9	1.9	18.0
50	Jeremiah Robinson-Earl	F	6-8	240	11/03/00	Villanova	3	39	8.6	.474	.333	.750	1.9	0.5	2.9		10.9	3.0	16.5
33	Malcolm Hill	F	6-6	220	10/26/95	Illinois	2	Did Not Play											
	Karlo Matkovic	F/C	6-10	231	3/30/01	Mega Basket		R — First NBA Season											
21	Yves Missi	C	7-0	235	5/14/04	Baylor		R — First NBA Season											
12	Antonio Reeves	G	6-4	205	11/20/02	Kentucky		R — First NBA Season											



CJ McCOLLUM

Jordan Hawkins also may contribute more this season after a promising rookie campaign in which he shot 36.6 percent from 3-point range as a shooting specialist off the bench.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Pelicans seem to get lost in the national conversation most years. They may not allow that to happen this season.

Williamson is capable of performing like a top-10 player in the league when fully healthy. Murray, Jones, Murphy and Ingram fill out an extremely balanced starting unit that is going to give other teams fits. And McCollum is an over-qualified sixth man.

This Pelicans team is deep, it is talented and it plays hard. The team has endured poor injury luck in recent years, which has masked how capable this group is when it's healthy.

The Pelicans also will be one of the more stylistically interesting teams in the league. They're going to improve their pace and 3-point shooting, which were both in the bottom half of the NBA last season. Murray and Jones will rack up a ton of steals, so expect this team to live in transition this season.

The Pelicans may have issues against the bigger teams in the Western Conference, such as the Los Angeles Lakers and Minnesota Timberwolves, but they are going to be versatile and tough to stop on offense. Given the substantial improvements to last year's roster — and more changes might be coming — they should be in the mix for the No. 4 seed in the West.

This is a team that may still have something left up its sleeve as well. Ingram could be moved for a starting center. Could the Utah Jazz's Walker Kessler be an option? New Orleans has a ton of picks to package in any potential deal if it does continue to add to its roster.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Chicago	8:00
Oct. 25	at Portland	10:00
Oct. 27	at Portland	6:00
Oct. 29	at Golden State	10:00
Oct. 30	at Golden State	10:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Indiana	8:00
Nov. 3	Atlanta	7:00
Nov. 4	Portland	9:30
Nov. 6	Cleveland	8:00
Nov. 8	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 11	Brooklyn	8:00
Nov. 13	at Oklahoma City	7:30
Nov. 15	Denver	8:00
Nov. 16	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Nov. 19	at Dallas	8:30
Nov. 20	at Cleveland	7:30
Nov. 22	Golden State	8:00
Nov. 25	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 27	Toronto	8:00
Nov. 29	at Memphis	5:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at New York	6:00
Dec. 2	at Atlanta	7:30
Dec. 5	Phoenix	8:00
Dec. 7	Oklahoma City	7:00
Dec. 8	at San Antonio	7:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	at Houston	8:00
Dec. 21	New York	8:00
Dec. 22	Denver	7:00
Dec. 26	Houston	8:00
Dec. 27	Memphis	8:00
Dec. 30	L.A. Clippers	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Miami	7:30
Jan. 3	Washington	8:00
Jan. 5	at Washington	6:00
Jan. 7	Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 8	Portland	8:00
Jan. 10	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 12	at Boston	6:00
Jan. 14	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 15	Dallas	8:00
Jan. 17	Utah	8:00
Jan. 20	Utah	8:00
Jan. 22	Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 24	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 25	at Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 27	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 29	Dallas	8:00
Jan. 31	Boston	8:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 3	at Denver	9:00
Feb. 5	at Denver	10:00
Feb. 8	at Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 10	at Oklahoma City	8:00

Feb. 12	Sacramento	8:00
Feb. 13	Sacramento	8:00
Feb. 21	at Dallas	9:30
Feb. 23	San Antonio	7:00
Feb. 25	San Antonio	8:00
Feb. 27	at Phoenix	10:00
Feb. 28	at Phoenix	9:00

MARCH

March 2	at Utah	8:00
March 4	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
March 6	Houston	8:00
March 8	at Houston	7:00
March 9	Memphis	7:00
March 11	L.A. Clippers	9:30
March 15	at San Antonio	8:30
March 17	Detroit	8:00
March 19	at Minnesota	7:30
March 21	at Minnesota	8:00
March 23	at Detroit	3:00
March 24	Philadelphia	8:00
March 28	Golden State	8:00
March 30	Charlotte	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
April 4	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
April 6	Orlando	7:00
April 8	at Brooklyn	7:30
April 9	at Milwaukee	8:00
April 11	Miami	8:00
April 13	Oklahoma City	3:30

All times Eastern



A SPURS



DEVIN VASSELL

SCOUTING THE SPURS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

“Everything centers around Victor Wembanyama, and if he takes another step this year, watch out. ... Chris Paul is on his last legs, but it was a good signing. They want a coach on the floor for Wembanyama, and he’s likely the right man for that job. ... Harrison Barnes also gives them another veteran presence, and he’s been in a lot of winning situations. ... If you’re San Antonio, this is probably another year of experimentation with a lot of guys. ... I really liked the pick of Stephon Castle in the draft. He could come right in and prove to be a long-term complement to Wembanyama.”

In 20-year-old superstar Victor Wembanyama, the team boasted one of the most must-see, made-for-TikTok, how-did-he-do-that young high-light-makers in the NBA. But the team Wembanyama headlined was one of the most dismal in the league. Despite the youngster’s unending supply of eyebrow-raising exploits, the Spurs failed to eclipse 22 victories for the second season in a row and turned in the second-worst record in the Western Conference.

With the 7-foot-4 Wembanyama back for an encore, the Spurs once again stand to be among the most-viewed teams in the NBA. Now, they hope the next act in the Wemby Show comes with a jump in the standings.

The Spurs’ decision-makers, including longtime head coach and president of basketball of operations Gregg Popovich and general manager Brian Wright, refuse to paint Wembanyama’s second NBA season as a matter of “playoffs or bust.” That said, there is acknowledgment that a third straight 60-loss campaign would be unacceptable.

To make that improvement, the Spurs are banking on growth from a callow cadre of holdovers that includes Wembanyama, 24-year-old shooting guard Devin Vassell, 21-year-old power forward Jeremy Sochan and 25-year-old swingman Keldon Johnson. Stephon Castle, the precocious 19-year-old guard the Spurs plucked from UConn’s NCAA championship team with the No. 4 pick in the draft, is expected to quickly join that future core.

The Spurs made a pair of moves in the offseason meant to prod the youth movement along, signing 12-time All-Star point guard Chris Paul to a one-year deal and landing 32-year-old forward Harrison Barnes from the Sacramento Kings via trade.

The Spurs’ fortunes, both now and in the future, rest with Wembanyama. If the young Frenchman makes a leap in his sophomore season, and if the other parts of the plan fall into place, the Spurs are optimistic they will finish 2024-25 closer to the playoffs than to another top-five draft pick.

FRONT COURT

The Spurs spent the early part of last season trying to determine the best way to deploy their newest weapon. Wembanyama began his NBA career as the club’s starting

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 32-39
DIVISION: 4TH

2020-21
Record: 33-39
DIVISION: 3RD

2021-22
Record: 34-48
DIVISION: 4TH

2022-23
Record: 22-60
DIVISION: 5TH

2023-24
Record: 22-60
DIVISION: 5TH

FROM LEFT: SCOTT WACHTER-USA TODAY SPORTS; ISAIAH J. DOWNING-USA TODAY SPORTS



VICTOR WEMBANYAMA



BEYOND THE ARC

Alien bookworm When he is not finishing alley-oop dunks or swatting opponent's shots into the bleachers, Victor Wembanyama loves to read. "I do it every day," he says. "I don't even think about doing it. I just want to do it." Wembanyama lists science fiction authors Brandon Sanderson and Robert Jordan among his favorites. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Wembanyama prefers hard copies of books over anything digital. "It hurts my eyes a little bit when I spend too much time on the screen," Wembanyama says.

Pop of ages Head coach Gregg Popovich is set to begin his 29th season at the Spurs' helm. At the time Popovich coached first game with the club — Dec. 10, 1996, against Phoenix — only two members of this season's Spurs roster were yet born: Chris Paul and Harrison Barnes. Popovich, who was inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame last fall and turns 76 in January, is the NBA's all-time leader in regular-season wins with 1,388. Don Nelson is second with 1,335.

King of the Castle First-round draft pick Stephon Castle arrived in San Antonio with at least a bit of silver and black in his background. Castle's father, Stacey, played college ball at Wake Forest — where he was briefly a teammate of future Spurs great Tim Duncan.



power forward next to center Zach Collins. But it was only after Wembanyama moved to center at midseason that things really began to take off.

The shift was most detectable on defense, where from the center position he was tasked with defending the rim against opposing drivers. He did so with impunity. Wembanyama became the NBA’s first rookie to earn first-team All-Defensive honors since Tim Duncan in the 1997-98 season.

Wembanyama finished second to Minnesota’s Rudy Gobert in the Defensive Player of the Year race but should be a favorite for that trophy for the next decade or more.

Sochan is the likely candidate to start at power forward after finishing last season there. Sochan has been something of an enigma since the Spurs selected him ninth overall in 2022, earning his keep as a dogged and versatile defender but still very much a work in progress on the offensive end.

Barnes slots as the team’s starting small forward, but he should see time at power forward as well. Barnes affords the Spurs’ roster something it didn’t have last season: a player who has won an NBA championship, something he accomplished with the 2015-16 Golden State Warriors.

Collins will look for a bounce-back season as the No. 2 center after a disappointing 2023-24 campaign. To help eat frontcourt minutes, the Spurs re-signed soon-to-be 24-year-old Charles Bassey, whose season ended with an ACL tear in December, and 25-year-old Sandro Mamukelashvili.

BACKCOURT

No position vexed the Spurs last season quite like point guard. Part of the conundrum was of their own making.

Preferring a bigger body in that spot, Popovich began the season experimenting with the 6-foot-8 Sochan there although he’d never played point guard at any level of basketball. When that gambit flamed out, the Spurs briefly handed the starting reins to now-21-year-old Malaki Branham, a move that didn’t quite take, either. At midseason, Popovich swung back to Tre Jones, the starter for 65

34.7

The Spurs set a franchise record by making 1,036 3-point shots last season. Yet the team converted only 34.7 percent from beyond the arc, tied for third worst in the league. The Spurs didn’t do much to improve there over the summer. Harrison Barnes’ 38.7-percent 3-point clip last season, by no means world beating, outpaces any of the Spurs’ returnees.



OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

- 1. Stephon Castle PG, 6-6, 215, UConn
 - 2. Juan Nuñez PG, 6-4, 190 , Ratiopharm Ulm (Germany)
 - 3. Harrison Ingram PF, 6-7. 230. North Carolina
- Castle helps raise the Spurs’ long-term ceiling as the team’s point guard of the future. Nuñez and Ingram will get some seasoning — Nuñez with Barcelona and Ingram with the G-League Austin Spurs.

Other Newcomers

The arrival of Chris Paul and Harrison Barnes immediately raises the Spurs’ floor. Their leadership and experience should enrich the Spurs on and off the floor.

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY					
HEAD COACH: GREGG POPOVICH (29TH SEASON; CAREER: 1,388-821)																	2023-24 STATISTICS					
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS			
1	Victor Wembanyama	F/C	7-4	210	1/04/04	Metropolitans 92	1	71	29.7	.465	.325	.796	10.6	3.9	21.4		17.2	6.2	34.7			
24	Devin Vassell	G/F	6-5	200	8/23/00	Florida State	4	68	33.1	.472	.372	.801	3.8	4.1	19.5		5.6	5.9	28.3			
3	Keldon Johnson	F/G	6-5	220	10/11/99	Kentucky	5	69	29.5	.454	.346	.792	5.5	2.8	15.7		8.9	4.6	25.5			
40	Harrison Barnes	F	6-8	225	5/30/92	North Carolina	12	82	29.0	.474	.387	.801	3.0	1.2	12.2		5.0	2.0	20.2			
10	Jeremy Sochan	F	6-8	230	5/20/03	Baylor	2	74	29.6	.438	.308	.771	6.4	3.4	11.6		10.4	5.4	18.8			
23	Zach Collins	F/C	6-11	250	11/19/97	Gonzaga	6	69	22.1	.484	.320	.753	5.4	2.8	11.2		11.6	6.1	24.4			
33	Tre Jones	G	6-1	185	1/08/00	Duke	4	77	27.8	.505	.335	.856	3.8	6.2	10.0		6.5	10.7	17.3			
22	Malaki Branham	F	6-4	180	5/12/03	Ohio State	2	75	21.3	.432	.347	.873	2.0	2.1	9.2		4.5	4.7	20.8			
	Chris Paul	G	6-0	175	5/06/85	Wake Forest	19	58	26.4	.441	.371	.827	3.9	6.8	9.2		7.1	12.3	16.7			
30	Julian Champagnie	F	6-7	217	6/29/01	St. John's	2	74	19.8	.408	.365	.815	2.8	1.4	6.8		6.7	3.4	16.5			
28	David Duke Jr.	G	6-4	204	10/13/99	Providence	3	4	12.8	.556	.500	1.000	2.5	1.3	6.5		9.3	4.7	24.3			
14	Blake Wesley	G	6-3	185	3/16/03	Notre Dame	2	61	14.4	.474	.218	.667	1.5	2.7	4.4		5.2	9.1	14.7			
54	Sandro Mamukelashvili	F/C	6-9	240	5/23/99	Seton Hall	3	46	9.8	.471	.297	.735	3.2	1.1	4.1		15.6	5.2	20.2			
25	Sidy Cissoko	G	6-6	200	4/02/04	G League Ignite	1	12	11.7	.485	.083	.800	1.8	0.8	3.8		7.5	3.4	15.3			
28	Charles Bassey	C/F	6-10	230	10/28/00	Western Kentucky	3	19	10.8	.725	.000	.833	4.0	1.1	3.3		17.8	4.9	14.7			
21	Jamaree Bouyea	G	6-2	180	6/27/99	San Francisco	2	9	10.5	.357	.111	.000	2.1	1.2	2.3		9.6	5.6	10.6			
	Stephon Castle	G	6-6	215	11/01/04	Connecticut		R — First NBA Season														
	Harrison Ingram	F	6-7	230	11/27/02	North Carolina		R — First NBA Season														
	Riley Minix	F	6-7	230	9/22/00	Morehead State		R — First NBA Season														
	Juan Nuñez	G	6-4	190	6/04/04	Ratiopharm Ulm		R — First NBA Season														



KELDON JOHNSON

games the season before. Jones was predictably solid, but the Spurs entered the offseason looking to improve their outlook at the point guard position.

On the verge of 40, Paul is not the player he was 10 years ago, or even five. But with his reservoir of veteran know-how and ability to expertly navigate a pick-and-roll, the NBA’s active leader in assists automatically elevates the position in San Antonio. If nothing else, it should be entertaining to watch Paul create a next-gen iteration of Lob City with Wembanyama.

Vassell, the team’s starting shooting guard, is coming off a career season and could be primed to take another leap. The team’s longest-tenured player, Johnson struggled initially with a move to the bench but should be more comfortable in that role entering his sixth season.

Julian Champagnie, the starter at small forward for most of last season, likely will see a shift to the bench after the Spurs’ summertime moves.

With Paul on board, Jones will occupy a more natural role running the second unit. Castle, the point guard of the future, will likely begin his career as a backup shooting guard but should see plenty of time at both backcourt positions.

It stands to be a make-or-break season for Branham and Blake Wesley, a pair of combo guards drafted in the first round in 2022 who have yet to build an NBA niche.

FINAL ANALYSIS

From the day the Spurs won the 2023 draft lottery, their stated goal has been to construct a long and lasting dynasty around Wembanyama, the kind capable of winning multiple championships. That doesn’t happen overnight. Expect the Spurs to be significantly improved in Year 2 of the Wembanyama era. Whether that translates to a playoff berth — or even a play-in bid — in the loaded Western Conference remains to be seen.

SCOTT WACHTER-USA TODAY SPORTS

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 24	at Dallas	7:30
Oct. 26	Houston	8:30
Oct. 28	Houston	8:00
Oct. 30	at Oklahoma City	9:30
Oct. 31	at Utah	9:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Minnesota	8:00
Nov. 4	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 6	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 7	Portland	8:00
Nov. 9	Utah	5:00
Nov. 11	Sacramento	8:00
Nov. 13	Washington	8:00
Nov. 15	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Nov. 16	at Dallas	8:30
Nov. 19	Oklahoma City	9:30
Nov. 21	Utah	8:00
Nov. 23	Golden State	8:30
Nov. 26	at Utah	9:00
Nov. 27	L.A. Lakers	8:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Sacramento	9:00
Dec. 3	at Phoenix	9:00
Dec. 5	Chicago	8:00
Dec. 6	Sacramento	8:00
Dec. 8	New Orleans	7:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	Atlanta	9:30
Dec. 21	Portland	8:30
Dec. 23	at Philadelphia	7:00
Dec. 25	at New York	12:00
Dec. 27	at Brooklyn	7:30
Dec. 29	at Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 31	L.A. Clippers	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 3	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 4	Denver	8:00
Jan. 6	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 8	at Milwaukee	9:30
Jan. 11	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 13	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 15	Memphis	8:00
Jan. 17	Memphis	7:00
Jan. 19	at Miami	3:00
Jan. 23	at Indiana	2:00
Jan. 25	Indiana	12:00
Jan. 29	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Jan. 31	Milwaukee	8:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Miami	8:30
Feb. 3	at Memphis	8:00
Feb. 5	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 7	at Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 8	at Orlando	7:00
Feb. 10	at Washington	7:00
Feb. 12	at Boston	7:00
Feb. 20	Phoenix	9:30
Feb. 21	Detroit	8:30

Feb. 23	at New Orleans	7:00
Feb. 25	at New Orleans	8:00
Feb. 26	at Houston	9:30

MARCH

March 1	at Memphis	8:00
March 2	Oklahoma City	7:00
March 4	Brooklyn	8:30
March 7	at Sacramento	10:00
March 9	at Minnesota	8:00
March 10	Dallas	8:30
March 12	Dallas	8:00
March 14	Charlotte	8:00
March 15	New Orleans	8:30
March 17	Orlando	8:00
March 19	New York	8:00
March 21	Philadelphia	8:00
March 23	at Toronto	6:00
March 25	at Detroit	7:00
March 27	at Cleveland	7:00
March 29	Boston	8:00
March 30	Golden State	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at Denver	9:00
April 4	Cleveland	8:00
April 6	at Portland	6:00
April 8	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
April 9	at Golden State	10:00
April 11	at Phoenix	10:00
April 13	Toronto	3:30

All times Eastern



NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

DEN NUGGETS



JAMAL MURRAY

SCOUTING THE NUGGETS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I thought they were the favorites for another title, even if they faced Boston. But the wheels just came off too often. Eventually, it cost them. ... Nikola Jokić will keep Denver in contention, but Jamal Murray, as good as he is, can be inconsistent. ... Kentavious Caldwell-Pope was a big loss (to Orlando as a free agent). In the past two years they've lost him and Bruce Brown. What have they done to replace them? That hurts. ... Russell Westbrook is a wild card. They gave up nothing to get him, so they had to do it. But I don't know if he helps you win a title at this stage of his career."

For most of last season, the Denver Nuggets' biggest obstacle seemed to be themselves. That self-destructive streak finally caught up with them in Game 7 of the Western Conference semifinals, when they blew a 20-point third-quarter lead and fell at home to the Minnesota Timberwolves. Lesson learned? That will be the question as Denver is again viewed as a major threat to win a championship. And Nikola Jokić remains the biggest reason why. But as the Nuggets showed last year, it has to be more than all Jokić, all the time. When it's something other than that, they've proven they can really go places. That will be the goal for head coach Michael Malone and his team — more consistency, from everyone, and more guys making plays at winning time.

FRONT COURT

Jokić is considered the best center in the Western Conference, and he may be a top-five point guard, too. Granted, he's not a point guard in the traditional sense, but if you're looking for someone to facilitate, you put the ball in Jokić's hands. He uses craftiness and a deft shooting touch to score pretty much at will; he positions himself and plays the angles to snare rebounds; and he finds open teammates sometimes even when it seems as if there's no avenue for a pass. In Denver, he is truly Mr. Everything, and as long as he's on the floor, the Nuggets have a shot at very big things.

Jokić again will be accompanied in the frontcourt by Aaron Gordon, the team's top defender and a capable scorer, as well as rangy shooter Michael Porter Jr. It's a frontcourt that plays well together and has won a title together, with Jokić being the jack-of-all-trades and Gordon and Porter the specialists. So the Nuggets have every reason to give them another run.

The issue here is depth, and that's what Denver tried to address by adding crafty center/forward Dario Šarić, a veteran who still can stretch the floor and make hustle plays. He showed as much in 64 underrated appearances for the Golden State Warriors last season.

Still, Šarić shouldn't be your go-to guy off the bench at this stage of his career. Unfortunately, that's exactly what

ISAIAH J. DOWNING-USA TODAY SPORTS (2)

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 46-27
DIVISION: 1ST

2020-21
Record: 47-25
DIVISION: 2ND

2021-22
Record: 48-34
DIVISION: 2ND

2022-23
Record: 53-29
DIVISION: 1ST

2023-24
Record: 57-25
DIVISION: 2ND



NIKOLA JOKIĆ



BEYOND THE ARC

West by Westbrook The Nuggets will be Russell Westbrook's sixth team in seven years, but he has one believer in former Nuggets guard and current Trail Blazers coach Chauncey Billups. "Russ does help with that depth that they need. He certainly helps provide some of those things," Billups told the *Denver Post*.

Silver lining The Nuggets were granted a disabled player exception in the wake of DaRon Holmes' season-ending Achilles injury. The DPE will give Denver \$1.5 million to spend — or about half of Holmes' \$3 million salary for the 2024-25 season. Although the Nuggets will have some extra spending power, a DPE doesn't give a team an extra roster spot.

Dirty apron Like so many others, the Nuggets are dealing with salary complications created by the new collective bargaining agreement. But former Nuggets head coach George Karl said that shouldn't matter. "If the Nuggets don't break the second, third, fourth, whatever apron to help [Nikola] Jokić get another NBA championship or two, I don't know what to say," Karl wrote on social media.

Sunny holiday The Nuggets will visit the Phoenix Suns on Christmas Day for the second time in three seasons. It will mark the fifth time in six years that Denver has played on Christmas.



he is in the Nuggets’ frontcourt. If he doesn’t deliver, Denver may be forced to use Gordon as the de facto backup at center.

Basically, there is very little depth here. Peyton Watson is more of a small forward who still has much to prove, and center DeAndre Jordan passed his prime about four years ago. Worse, first-round pick DaRon Holmes II suffered a torn Achilles during his Summer League debut and is expected to miss the entire season. Translation: Don’t be surprised if Denver looks for reserve help all the way up to the trade deadline.

BACKCOURT

Jamal Murray is one of those guys who probably deserves a spot in the All-Star Game but never gets to go. He’s the Pippen to Jokić’s Jordan. Murray is just that good. Problem is, his shot can be a little inconsistent, and although he’s a constant threat, you often don’t know what you will get from one quarter to the next in terms of scoring. When Murray is hot, the Nuggets are generally unbeatable. When he’s not, well, Jokić is suddenly left looking for a reliable No. 2, and that’s been an iffy proposition.

So the idea this year will be to find a way to bring out the absolute best in Murray on a much more regular basis. That’s especially the case since top-notch defender and occasional big-shot maker Kenavtious Caldwell-Pope bolted for Orlando in free agency. Caldwell-Pope rarely scored in bunches, but he sometimes could when the need arose. Now, that job presumably will belong to third-year man Christian Braun, a good athlete who plays hard and finds ways to contribute but can be a bit uneven offensively. Like so many others, his good nights will now need to outweigh the bad.

Just in case, the Nuggets added Russell Westbrook, the former triple-double machine and 2017 NBA MVP. Westbrook isn’t close to the player he once was, but he’s still an intelligent guard who will push the tempo and bring an edge.

28-2

That was the Nuggets’ record last season against teams under .500. That was the best such mark in the NBA — and if there’s one thing they should be able to bank on, it’s that they have a history of taking care of business against teams they’re supposed to beat in the Nikola Jokić era.



OFFSEASON MOVES

1. DaRon Holmes II
PF, 6-10, 220, Dayton
The Nuggets ended up with one pick — via a draft-night trade with Phoenix — and wouldn’t you know it, he’s out for the season due to a torn Achilles in his debut at the Las Vegas Summer League.

Other Newcomers
Russell Westbrook is a former triple-double machine who — the Nuggets hope — still has some gas in the tank. Center/forward Dario Šarić averaged eight points per game for the Warriors last season, his best scoring average since 2020-21. Undrafted rookie guard Trey Alexander was signed to a two-way deal.

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE		
HEAD COACH: MICHAEL MALONE (10TH SEASON; CAREER: 463-362)																	PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
15	Nikola Jokić	C	6-11	284	2/19/95	Mega Basket	9	79	34.6	.583	.359	.817	12.4	9.0	26.4		17.1	12.4	36.6
27	Jamal Murray	G	6-4	215	2/23/97	Kentucky	7	59	31.5	.481	.425	.853	4.1	6.5	21.2		6.2	9.9	32.2
1	Michael Porter Jr.	F	6-10	218	6/29/98	Missouri	5	81	31.7	.484	.397	.836	7.0	1.5	16.7		10.6	2.3	25.4
50	Aaron Gordon	F	6-8	235	9/16/95	Arizona	10	73	31.5	.556	.290	.658	6.5	3.5	13.9		9.8	5.4	21.2
0	Russell Westbrook	G	6-4	200	11/12/88	UCLA	16	68	22.5	.454	.273	.688	5.0	4.5	11.1		10.8	9.6	23.7
20	Dario Šarić	F/C	6-10	225	4/08/94	Anadolu Efes	7	64	17.2	.466	.376	.849	4.4	2.3	8.0		12.4	6.3	22.5
0	Christian Braun	G	6-6	220	4/17/01	Kansas	2	82	20.2	.460	.384	.694	3.7	1.6	7.3		8.9	3.8	17.4
8	Peyton Watson	G	6-7	200	9/11/02	UCLA	2	80	18.6	.465	.296	.670	3.2	1.1	6.7		8.3	2.8	17.2
3	Julian Strawther	G	6-6	205	4/18/02	Gonzaga	1	50	10.9	.369	.297	.710	1.2	0.9	4.5		5.4	4.1	20.0
6	DeAndre Jordan	C	6-11	265	7/21/88	Texas A&M	16	36	11.0	.624	.000	.491	4.4	0.7	3.9		19.0	3.2	17.2
22	Zeke Nnaji	F/C	6-9	240	1/09/01	Arizona	4	58	9.9	.463	.261	.677	2.2	0.6	3.2		10.4	2.7	15.5
24	Jalen Pickett	G	6-2	202	10/22/99	Penn State	1	27	4.5	.429	.360	.750	0.5	0.8	1.6		5.5	8.3	16.6
4	Hunter Tyson	F	6-8	215	6/13/00	Clemson	1	18	2.7	.400	.286	.000	0.5	0.1	1.1		9.0	2.0	20.0
20	Trey Alexander	G	6-4	185	5/02/03	Creighton													
25	PJ Hall	C	6-10	245	2/21/02	Clemson													
	DaRon Holmes II	F	6-10	225	8/15/02	Dayton													
	Spencer Jones	F	6-7	225	6/14/01	Stanford													
	Gabe McGlothan	F	6-7	235	3/03/99	Grand Canyon													
	Jaylin Williams	F	6-8	245	7/26/00	Auburn													
	Jahmir Young	G	6-1	185	10/07/00	Maryland													



MICHAEL PORTER JR.

The Nuggets landed him for basically nothing, so it's a low-risk, high-reward move — but they will need it to pay off. There simply won't be enough production off the bench without Westbrook being at least as good as he was last season.

Meanwhile, the Nuggets were encouraged by Julian Strawther's performance at the Las Vegas Summer League and are banking on him to provide much-needed shooting to the rotation. He will get every opportunity for meaningful minutes in his second season.

Nonetheless, for a team with title aspirations, Denver sure has a lot of unknowns in the backcourt beyond Murray.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Again, as long as Jokić is happy and healthy, the Nuggets have a chance at a deep playoff run. As great as he is individually, perhaps his greatest skill is making life easier for everyone else — creating open opportunities by delivering the ball to teammates' shooting pockets or finding them underneath for easy layups and dunks.

There shouldn't be any doubting Malone's in-game adjustments or overall strategy. Few head coaches are as respected and beloved by their players.

Still, if the Nuggets are to return to being a team capable of winning it all, they will need a career-best season from just about every starter. At the very least, Porter and Gordon will have to match their recent production. Murray may have to be better. Braun definitely will have to be better. And at least one bench player will have to come out of nowhere to haunt the opposition.

On the bright side, those things are not impossible, or even unlikely. So there are plenty of reasons to believe Denver can return to the top. It will just take some extra consistency and determination.

JASON PARKHURST-USA TODAY SPORTS

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 24	Oklahoma City	10:00
Oct. 26	L.A. Clippers	5:00
Oct. 28	at Toronto	7:30
Oct. 29	at Brooklyn	7:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Minnesota	9:30
Nov. 2	Utah	10:00
Nov. 4	Toronto	10:00
Nov. 6	Oklahoma City	9:00
Nov. 8	Miami	9:00
Nov. 10	Dallas	8:00
Nov. 15	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 17	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 19	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 22	Dallas	10:00
Nov. 23	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Nov. 25	New York	9:00
Nov. 27	at Utah	9:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
Dec. 3	Golden State	10:00
Dec. 5	at Cleveland	7:00
Dec. 7	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 8	at Atlanta	6:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17: Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds		
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16: Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games		
Dec. 19	at Portland	10:00
Dec. 22	at New Orleans	7:00

Dec. 23	Phoenix	10:00
Dec. 25	at Phoenix	10:30
Dec. 27	Cleveland	9:00
Dec. 28	Detroit	9:00
Dec. 30	at Utah	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Atlanta	9:00
Jan. 3	San Antonio	9:00
Jan. 4	at San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 7	Boston	10:00
Jan. 8	L.A. Clippers	9:00
Jan. 10	Brooklyn	9:00
Jan. 12	at Dallas	3:00
Jan. 14	at Dallas	9:30
Jan. 15	Houston	9:00
Jan. 17	at Miami	8:00
Jan. 19	at Orlando	6:00
Jan. 21	Philadelphia	10:00
Jan. 23	Sacramento	9:00
Jan. 25	at Minnesota	3:00
Jan. 27	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 29	at New York	7:30
Jan. 31	at Philadelphia	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 3	New Orleans	9:00
Feb. 5	New Orleans	10:00
Feb. 6	Orlando	9:00
Feb. 8	at Phoenix	9:00
Feb. 10	Portland	9:00
Feb. 12	Portland	9:00

Feb. 20	Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 22	L.A. Lakers	8:30
Feb. 24	at Indiana	7:00
Feb. 27	at Milwaukee	7:30
Feb. 28	at Detroit	7:00

MARCH

March 2	at Boston	1:00
March 5	Sacramento	9:00
March 7	Phoenix	10:00
March 9	at Oklahoma City	1:00
March 10	at Oklahoma City	8:00
March 12	Minnesota	10:00
March 14	L.A. Lakers	9:30
March 15	Washington	9:00
March 17	at Golden State	10:00
March 19	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
March 21	at Portland	10:00
March 23	at Houston	7:00
March 24	Chicago	9:00
March 26	Milwaukee	9:00
March 28	Utah	9:00

APRIL

April 1	Minnesota	10:00
April 2	San Antonio	9:00
April 4	at Golden State	10:00
April 6	Indiana	8:00
April 9	at Sacramento	10:00
April 11	Memphis	9:00
April 13	at Houston	3:30

All times Eastern



NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: 2ND

MIN T-WOLVES

There is a rising tide in Minnesota. The gravitational pull of 23-year-old superstar Anthony Edwards lifted the Timberwolves to their first Western Conference finals appearance in 20 years. This season, they'll play on Christmas Day for only the third time ever.

Their national profile is rising right alongside their results, and it all largely stems from the emergence of Edwards, whose on-court charisma captivates any audience.

The ages of Edwards and a couple of other key contributors around him — second-team All-Defensive member Jaden McDaniels (24) and reigning Sixth Man of the Year Naz Reid (25) — suggest that Minnesota will continue to grow and improve along its current upward trajectory.

But, fresh off an appearance in the NBA's final four, there are only so many steps remaining, and they're often the hardest to take.

FRONTCOURT

McDaniels will continue to be one of the league's premier perimeter defenders, but his ability to score off the ball — particularly via the catch-and-shoot triple — will set the ceiling for Minnesota's offense. Edwards' development as a playmaker becomes far simpler when the opposing defense must respect every offensive player stationed around the perimeter. If McDaniels can become more consistent with his jumper and offense — perhaps building toward averaging 14-15 points per game — he'll become the type of two-way threat that could serve as the true Robin to Edwards' Batman.

The more offensive weapons Minnesota can develop, the better. The lack of those options reared its head in last year's conference finals, when Karl-Anthony Towns, perhaps the premier shooting big man in the game, lost his shooting touch for a few games. Towns has adapted his game to help make Minnesota's big-ball lineup fit — he's a willing playmaker capable of utilizing Rudy Gobert in the high-low game — but he continues to be a bit of a postseason question mark. Not knowing what you'll get in the biggest of moments out of your \$50 million man should make a championship contender uneasy.

Minnesota's playoff run last season painted the organiza-



KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS

SCOUTING THE T-WOLVES

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Anthony Edwards has taken it to another level. He went from pretty good to elite in one season. ... They may have the best and most cohesive starting five in the league other than maybe Boston. ... Notice how everyone seemingly has gotten better since they traded for Mike Conley? He's the consummate point guard for this group. ... We all had our doubts about the fit of Karl-Anthony Towns and Rudy Gobert, but head coach Chris Finch has done a great job of getting everyone to play to their strengths. ... I really don't see many negatives here. Just keep doing what they've been doing."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 19-45
DIVISION: 5TH

2020-21
Record: 23-49
DIVISION: 4TH

2021-22
Record: 46-36
DIVISION: 3RD

2022-23
Record: 42-40
DIVISION: 2ND

2023-24
Record: 56-26
DIVISION: 3RD

FROM LEFT: BRAD REMPEL-USA TODAY SPORTS; BRAD REMPEL-USA TODAY SPORTS



ANTHONY EDWARDS



BEYOND THE ARC

That Conley contract

Mike Conley inked a two-year, \$20.75 million extension with Minnesota in the middle of last season. Given the way the offseason played out — with the lack of cap space or ability of teams in the aprons to execute sign-and-trades — the deal appears to work well for both sides.

Coaching chemistry

Micah Nori was a hot head-coaching candidate in the offseason, after stalking the sidelines for the Wolves in the play-offs while head coach Chris Finch was impeded by a torn patellar tendon. Nori was linked to several jobs but ultimately was passed over and will be back on Minnesota's bench. That's a win for Finch, who relies heavily on his longtime friend for strategic decisions as well as a good laugh. It's also good for Timberwolves fans who enjoy Nori's witty half-time comments on local television broadcasts. Said Nori at halftime of a game last season after Minnesota struggled to get stops: "Our paint defense was like 7/11 — open 24 hours."

Two words — Naz Reid

Reid was once Minnesota's forgotten big man. But last season, the undrafted big's work ethic and determination led him to Sixth Man of the Year honors. Reid is certainly appreciated in Minnesota, where simply saying his full name has become a common passing exchange between Wolves fans.



tion into a bit of a corner in terms of keeping the roster together, but Towns is a perennial trade possibility given Minnesota’s salary cap crunch and the question of whether the 7-foot sharpshooter can be a No. 2 option on a title team.

Conversely, the Wolves know exactly what they’ll get out of Gobert, who snatched his fourth Defensive Player of the Year award last season while anchoring a historically good Wolves defense. But Gobert’s impact declined in the latter stages of the playoffs. And as much as he raises the team’s defensive floor, he hurts the team’s ceiling on offense. Gobert helps Minnesota in a number of matchups, but he looks like a bit of a liability in others, as was the case against the Dallas Mavericks.

Nickeil Alexander-Walker struggled over the final two rounds of the playoffs, and his struggles continued with Team Canada at the Paris Olympics. He will be an integral part of Minnesota’s wing rotation, but his exact minute load likely will be determined by how much backup point guard he plays.

The arrival of first-round pick Rob Dillingham gives head coach Chris Finch another wing/guard option that could potentially eat into Alexander-Walker’s minutes. Alexander-Walker doesn’t seem to have gained Finch’s full trust, and it wouldn’t be a surprise if Dillingham were playing more by season’s end.

Beyond those two, more minutes at the 3 or 4 could be up for grabs after Kyle Anderson’s offseason exit. The Timberwolves could go to veteran signee Joe Ingles, or they could lean further into a youth movement by giving opportunity to recent draft picks Leonard Miller or Josh Minott. Ingles has a familiarity with Mike Conley and Gobert as former teammates on the Utah Jazz, and with a team playing for a title, his shooting and reliability likely will be more attractive to Finch than the younger wild cards.

BACKCOURT

Although Edwards isn’t the perfect personification of Finch’s preferred brand of basketball — which is centered on pace, ball movement and quick decision-making — the high-flying guard has adapted his game to incorporate more

-26.5

That was Minnesota’s clutch-time net rating after Christmas last season, second worst in the NBA ahead of only the Detroit Pistons. The Timberwolves struggled to close out tight games, a trend carried forward from previous campaigns that proved to be their downfall in the Western Conference finals. If that number doesn’t drastically improve, the Wolves won’t win a title.



OFFSEASON MOVES

- Draft picks
- 1. Rob Dillingham PG, 6-3, 175, Kentucky
 - 1. Terrence Shannon Jr. SG, 6-6, 215, Illinois

The Wolves were aggressive in trading up to No. 8 for the undersized Dillingham, whom they viewed as an elite on-ball creator. There’s no doubt Dillingham gives Minnesota an offensive upgrade with his quickness and shotmaking. But can he guard anyone? Shannon was dominant at getting downhill in college and has defensive upside.

Other Newcomers

The Wolves brought in veterans Joe Ingles and PJ Dozier on minimum deals, while elevating big man Luka Garza from a two-way contract to a minimum pact.

ROSTER							2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: CHRIS FINCH (5TH SEASON; CAREER: 160-127)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
5	Anthony Edwards	G	6-4	225	8/05/01	Georgia	4	79	35.1	.461	.357	.836	5.4	5.1	25.9		7.5	7.0	35.5
32	Karl-Anthony Towns	C/F	7-0	248	11/15/95	Kentucky	9	62	32.7	.504	.416	.873	8.3	3.0	21.8		12.2	4.5	32.0
27	Rudy Gobert	C	7-1	258	6/26/92	Cholet	11	76	34.1	.661	.000	.638	12.9	1.3	14.0		18.2	1.9	19.6
11	Naz Reid	C/F	6-9	264	8/26/99	LSU	5	81	24.2	.477	.414	.736	5.2	1.3	13.5		10.3	2.6	26.6
10	Mike Conley	G	6-0	175	10/11/87	Ohio State	17	76	28.9	.457	.442	.911	2.9	5.9	11.4		4.8	9.8	19.0
3	Jaden McDaniels	F	6-9	185	9/29/00	Washington	4	72	29.2	.489	.337	.722	3.1	1.4	10.5		5.1	2.3	17.3
9	Nickeil Alexander-Walker	G	6-5	205	9/02/98	Virginia Tech	5	82	23.4	.439	.391	.800	2.0	2.5	8.0		4.2	5.1	16.4
7	Joe Ingles	F/G	6-9	220	10/02/87	Maccabi Tel Aviv	10	68	17.2	.436	.435	.824	2.1	3.0	4.4		5.8	8.3	12.2
55	Luka Garza	C	6-10	243	12/27/98	Iowa	3	25	4.9	.480	.281	.720	1.2	0.2	4.0		12.2	1.6	39.0
12	Daishen Nix	G	6-3	226	2/13/02	G League Ignite	3	15	3.3	.375	.353	.500	0.2	0.4	1.8		2.9	5.8	26.0
33	Leonard Miller	F	6-10	210	11/26/03	G League Ignite	1	17	3.1	.650	.400	.500	1.2	0.5	1.7		18.3	7.3	26.6
8	Josh Minott	F	6-8	205	11/25/02	Memphis	2	32	2.9	.472	.400	.857	0.5	0.3	1.6		8.9	4.2	26.3
35	PJ Dozier	G/F	6-6	205	10/25/96	South Carolina	6	Did Not Play in the NBA											
0	Jaylen Clark	G	6-4	205	10/13/01	UCLA		R — First NBA Season											
4	Rob Dillingham	G	6-3	175	1/04/05	Kentucky		R — First NBA Season											
	Jesse Edwards	C	6-11	230	3/18/00	West Virginia		R — First NBA Season											
00	Terrence Shannon Jr.	G/F	6-6	215	7/30/00	Illinois		R — First NBA Season											



RUDY GOBERT

of all of those things, and he is becoming a better player because of it. Edwards’ playmaking growth was obvious over the back half of the 2023-24 campaign. As opposing defenses continue to commit extra defenders and gap help to slow Edwards and deter his incredible knack for attacking the basket, his increased ability to recognize the defense and its weaknesses should make the Wolves’ offense more drought-proof than it’s been in the past.

The more Edwards can serve as the fulcrum of Minnesota’s offense, the more Conley mileage the Wolves can preserve for the postseason. Conley’s veteran hand and high basketball IQ were integral to Minnesota’s success last season, as he sacrificed much of his own offense to promote ball movement and get the offensive weapons their touches. His calf issues nearly derailed the Wolves in the second round of the playoffs and hampered the team in the conference finals.

FINAL ANALYSIS

It’s odd to say for a team on the rise, but this might be the last great chance for this edition of the Timberwolves to contend for a title given the ages of Conley (turns 37 in November) and Gobert (32) and Minnesota’s prohibitive cap sheet.

It’s difficult to see those veterans or even Towns — likely a finished product at this point — propelling the team to another level. So whether or not this core plateaus is likely to be determined by the continued ascension of players such as Edwards, McDaniels and Reid and potential contributions from rookies like Dillingham and Terrence Shannon Jr.

Those young pieces have Minnesota well positioned to be among the NBA’s elite tier this season and beyond, but it’s difficult to see the Wolves’ offense being consistently good enough to keep pace with the likes of the Oklahoma City Thunder — which made a series of splash moves this offseason — and Boston Celtics to truly contend for a title in 2024-25.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Oct. 24	at Sacramento	10:00
Oct. 26	Toronto	8:00
Oct. 29	Dallas	7:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Denver	9:30
Nov. 2	at San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 4	Charlotte	9:00
Nov. 7	at Chicago	8:00
Nov. 8	Portland	9:00
Nov. 10	Miami	7:00
Nov. 12	at Portland	10:00
Nov. 13	at Portland	10:00
Nov. 15	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 17	Phoenix	3:30
Nov. 21	at Toronto	7:30
Nov. 24	at Boston	3:30
Nov. 26	Houston	8:00
Nov. 27	Sacramento	8:00
Nov. 29	L.A. Clippers	7:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Dec. 4	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Dec. 6	at Golden State	10:00
Dec. 8	at Golden State	8:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	New York	8:00

Dec. 21	Golden State	8:00
Dec. 23	at Atlanta	7:30
Dec. 25	at Dallas	2:30
Dec. 27	at Houston	8:00
Dec. 29	San Antonio	8:00
Dec. 31	at Oklahoma City	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Boston	7:30
Jan. 4	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 6	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Jan. 7	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 9	at Orlando	7:00
Jan. 11	Memphis	8:00
Jan. 13	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 15	Golden State	8:00
Jan. 17	at New York	7:30
Jan. 18	Cleveland	9:00
Jan. 20	at Memphis	2:30
Jan. 22	at Dallas	7:30
Jan. 25	Denver	3:00
Jan. 27	Atlanta	8:00
Jan. 29	at Phoenix	9:00
Jan. 30	at Utah	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Washington	8:00
Feb. 3	Sacramento	8:00
Feb. 5	Chicago	8:00
Feb. 6	Houston	8:00
Feb. 8	Portland	8:00
Feb. 10	at Cleveland	7:00
Feb. 12	Milwaukee	8:00

Feb. 13	Oklahoma City	8:30
Feb. 21	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 23	Oklahoma City	9:30
Feb. 24	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 27	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Feb. 28	at Utah	9:30

MARCH

March 2	at Phoenix	9:30
March 4	Philadelphia	8:00
March 5	at Charlotte	7:00
March 7	at Miami	8:00
March 9	San Antonio	8:00
March 12	at Denver	10:00
March 14	Orlando	8:00
March 16	Utah	7:00
March 17	Indiana	8:00
March 19	New Orleans	7:30
March 21	New Orleans	8:00
March 24	at Indiana	7:00
March 28	Phoenix	8:00
March 30	Detroit	7:00

APRIL

April 1	at Denver	10:00
April 3	at Brooklyn	7:30
April 5	at Philadelphia	7:00
April 8	at Milwaukee	8:00
April 10	at Memphis	9:30
April 11	Brooklyn	9:00
April 13	Utah	3:30

All times Eastern



NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **1ST**

OKC THUNDER



JALEN WILLIAMS

SCOUTING THE THUNDER

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

“What a masterful job GM Sam Presti has done there. Most people thought they were tanking. Instead, they’re very good and loaded with draft picks and assets. ... Shai Gilgeous-Alexander is in a league by himself. Add Chet Holmgren and your foundation is set. ... Getting Alex Caruso in the Josh Giddey trade [with Chicago] is a big upgrade. Caruso is the type of hustling, scrappy veteran this team needs. Same goes for Isaiah Hartenstein in the middle. ... Everyone would’ve accepted if they had just stood pat after the way things went last year, so kudos to them for identifying needs and going out and fixing them.”

The last time the Oklahoma City Thunder faced expectations like these, the world hardly knew the team even had a Big Three. Its superstars — Kevin Durant, Russell Westbrook and eventually James Harden — were baby-faced and punching above their weight.

Just over a decade later, this young Thunder squad is resurrecting the feeling that Durant’s early OKC squads created. Maybe even something more. Perhaps no team this young has ever created such grand expectations.

The No. 1 seed — and youngest top seed in NBA history — from a rigorous Western Conference a season ago returns virtually all of its core and has filled in the gaps with coveted role players Alex Caruso and Isaiah Hartenstein.

OKC’s MVP runner-up, seventh-year guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, is entering his prime. Chet Holmgren and Jalen Williams, SGA’s pair of co-stars, got a year older and a year better. OKC isn’t exactly veteran laden, but it has matured after playing a couple of playoff series.

Now the Thunder are a favorite to win the Western Conference. But are OKC’s transactions enough to push it from upstart to contender? Is the time truly now?

FRONTCOURT

As perhaps the most fluid team in the league with regard to lineups, the Thunder’s frontcourt looks a bit less traditional than most. It’ll be dressed up for effectiveness with smaller wings, and some of the players billed as frontcourt players will double as guards or positionless ball-handlers.

Williams, a guard with a wing’s body, will spend plenty of time as a pseudo-power forward again. Holmgren, a 7-foot-1 floor-stretching nightmare, will play plenty at center in addition to power forward.

Hartenstein, OKC’s biggest free-agent signing ever, will be the secondary rim protector, rigid screener and tenacious rebounder that the team could’ve used a year ago. Aaron Wiggins, one of the league’s most underrated role players, is a relatively definitive frontcourt player on a team with myriad ball-handlers.

Beyond them, the frontcourt gets a bit complicated. Kenrich Williams was vital two years ago — less so last season. This season, he’s seemingly being forced out of the rotation.

FROM LEFT: JEROME MIRON-USA TODAY SPORTS; ALONZO ADAMS-USA TODAY SPORTS

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 44-28
DIVISION: 2ND

2020-21
Record: 22-50
DIVISION: 5TH

2021-22
Record: 24-58
DIVISION: 5TH

2022-23
Record: 40-42
DIVISION: 3RD

2023-24
Record: 57-25
DIVISION: 1ST



SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER



BEYOND THE ARC

Name game Jalen Williams and Jaylin Williams are hoping this season is the last — the last time they get confused for one another despite differently spelled first names. They've even harped on their own nicknames — Jalen is "J Dub," while Jaylin is "JWill" — as a crutch for confused broadcasters. They're still holding out hope.

Still waiting Per BBall Index, Luguentz Dort has received an A+ grade for his perimeter isolation defense for every season of his career. He remains one of the league's most celebrated defenders without an All-Defensive selection.

Spring into action A lot remains classified with head coach Mark Daigneault, but there's one thing he's happily been outspoken about: Bruce Springsteen. The 39-year-old has said that he's quoted Springsteen lyrics to past teams; he's played his music during practices; and even gone as far as playing music over tape in the film room, the soundtrack to a flurry of turnovers. Daigneault knows who's the boss.

G League MVPs The Thunder don't have just one former G League Finals MVP. They have two. Ousmane Dieng received the award last season, helping lift the OKC Blue to a championship. And after acquiring Isaiah Hartenstein, who won it with the Rio Grande Valley Vipers in 2019, OKC is harboring more than any team in the league.



Ousmane Dieng is entering his third season as a tantalizing “what if,” drafted No. 11 overall in 2022 though not yet a convincing contributor.

Jaylin Williams was thrust into some major minutes in the Western Conference semifinals against the Dallas Mavericks. Hartenstein, save for the passable 3-point shooting, does everything Williams can — just better. And if revered shooting coach Chip Engelland can tap into Hartenstein’s jump shot, then Williams could be deemed obsolete.

First-round pick Dillon Jones could be a promising contributor. But he’s a rookie, one with an unorthodox build and game. He’s another guard in a wing’s body, heavier than most and expected to rebound well for his position. He falls in line with the herd of guards and ball-handling wings that the Thunder will assemble in their de facto frontcourt.

For what it’s worth, it works. Hartenstein will attempt to make up for some of the ensuing disadvantages that came from being outrebounded. But the Thunder’s best lineups, efficient and fluid, were always smaller next to Holmgren. OKC isn’t compromising simply to appear traditional.

BACKCOURT

The Thunder backcourt features everything a growing contender might need. A franchise-altering lead guard? Gilgeous-Alexander checks the box. A dead-eye movement shooter? Isaiah Joe stands alone. A 3-and-D guard who can defend at the point of attack? OKC might have more than any team needs. That’s a big reason so many observers are betting on the Thunder this season.

The addition of Caruso, a back-to-back All-Defensive selection and an NBA champion, is monumental for an already-stacked perimeter defense that includes Luguentz Dort and Cason Wallace. Caruso only cost the Thunder Josh Giddey, whose outgrown fit and ambition weren’t long for OKC.

Caruso is a scalable player, capable of handling some pick-and-rolls — now more as a screener than ever — and a better fit in the off-ball role than Giddey. Over the course of his career, Caruso has been asked to do everything that’s required in OKC’s drive-and-kick offense and sound defense.

Of course, Gilgeous-Alexander is the engine for which these cogs have been

46.7%

That’s what Isaiah Hartenstein shot from deep (14-of-30) during his most efficient 3-point shooting season (2021-22 with the Clippers).

For the sake of versatility and lineups, Hartenstein as a long-distance threat could unlock even more doors.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

1. Nikola Topić
PG, 6-6, 200, Crvena zvezda (Serbia)

1. Dillon Jones
F, 6-6, 235, Weber State

2. Ajay Mitchell
PG, 6-5, 190, UC Santa Barbara
Topić, sidelined with a torn ACL, won’t play until next season. Mitchell, a two-way player, likely will leave his mark on the G League. Jones, an unconventional player, will try to earn minutes.

Other Newcomers

Alex Caruso and Isaiah Hartenstein will be key role players — Caruso with his outside shooting and defense vs. bigger wings and small guards alike; and Hartenstein with his rim protection, high-post playmaking and screens.

ROSTER							2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: MARK DAIGNEAULT (5TH SEASON; CAREER: 143-175)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
2	Shai Gilgeous-Alexander	G	6-6	195	7/12/98	Kentucky	6	75	34.0	.535	.353	.874	5.5	6.2	30.1		7.8	8.7	42.4
8	Jalen Williams	G/F	6-5	211	4/14/01	Santa Clara	2	71	31.3	.540	.427	.814	4.0	4.5	19.1		6.1	7.0	29.2
7	Chet Holmgren	C/F	7-1	208	5/01/02	Gonzaga	1	82	29.4	.530	.370	.793	7.9	2.4	16.5		12.9	4.0	27.0
5	Luguentz Dort	G	6-4	220	4/19/99	Arizona State	5	79	28.4	.438	.394	.826	3.6	1.4	10.9		6.1	2.4	18.4
9	Alex Caruso	G	6-5	186	2/28/94	Texas A&M	7	71	28.7	.468	.408	.760	3.8	3.5	10.1		6.4	5.8	16.8
11	Isaiah Joe	G	6-3	165	7/02/99	Arkansas	4	78	18.5	.458	.416	.865	2.3	1.3	8.2		6.0	3.3	21.1
55	Isaiah Hartenstein	C/F	7-0	250	5/05/98	Zalgiris	6	75	25.3	.644	.333	.707	8.3	2.5	7.8		15.8	4.8	14.7
21	Aaron Wiggins	G	6-5	190	1/02/99	Maryland	3	78	15.7	.562	.492	.789	2.4	1.1	6.9		7.3	3.4	21.2
22	Cason Wallace	G	6-3	195	11/07/03	Kentucky	1	82	20.6	.491	.419	.784	2.3	1.5	6.8		5.3	3.4	15.9
34	Kenrich Williams	G/F	6-6	210	12/02/94	TCU	6	69	14.9	.468	.397	.500	3.0	1.3	4.7		9.7	4.3	15.2
6	Jaylin Williams	F	6-9	240	6/29/02	Arkansas	2	69	13.0	.417	.368	.805	3.4	1.6	4.0		12.5	5.9	14.8
13	Ousmane Dieng	F	6-9	185	5/21/03	New Zealand Breakers	2	33	11.1	.422	.300	.875	1.5	1.1	4.0		6.7	4.9	17.5
14	Adam Flagler	G	6-3	180	12/01/99	Baylor	1	2	7.0	.143	.167	.000	0.0	2.0	1.5		0.0	13.7	10.3
	Alex Ducas	G	6-7	220	12/11/00	Mount Saint Mary's													
3	Dillon Jones	F	6-6	235	10/29/01	Weber State													
25	Ajay Mitchell	G	6-5	190	6/25/02	UC Santa Barbara													
44	Nikola Topić	G	6-6	200	8/10/05	KK Crvena Zvezda													



CHET HOLMGREN

assembled. He’s a walking paint touch, a ball-handler with a lulling pace, a guard who flirts with the rim as much as anyone with drives of unmatched rhythm.

There is no true point guard behind him. In the wake of OKC’s second-round loss to the Mavs, general manager Sam Presti mentioned that passing — not dribbling — was what won Dallas the series.

The Thunder will continue to rely on many of their rotational players to be adequate ball-handlers and to make reads on drives earned by spacing and creative actions. But for the sake of initiating offense, OKC is depending on playmaking leaps from Wallace, Holmgren and Jalen Williams, whose creativity was mostly diminished by the Dallas defense.

Should those creators mature with the runway Presti has seemingly granted them, Gilgeous-Alexander will have his best shot yet at a deep playoff run.

FINAL ANALYSIS

If the Thunder don’t look the part early on, it’ll be because head coach Mark Daigneault will likely be trying myriad lineups into January. OKC’s data scientists won’t rest until they’ve got information on every configuration. Short, fast, old — every lineup possible. But the expectations will remain.

This isn’t a year ago, when the young Thunder caught teams by surprise. The target is on OKC’s back from opening night. Anything but a trip to the Western Conference finals will be considered a failure.

On paper, the Thunder look destined to improve. Even kooky lineups don’t seem to be standing in the way of 60 wins. But with their shiny new toys, the Thunder will have to be a good shooting team while still displaying the elite offense and defense that they played a year ago.

Then, maybe, the Thunder will be the latest contender to ignore trivial issues like age and experience. Maybe it’ll look just like the old days in Oklahoma City.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 24	at Denver	10:00
Oct. 26	at Chicago	8:00
Oct. 27	Atlanta	7:00
Oct. 30	San Antonio	9:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Portland	10:00
Nov. 2	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 4	Orlando	9:15
Nov. 6	at Denver	9:00
Nov. 8	Houston	8:00
Nov. 10	Golden State	7:00
Nov. 11	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Nov. 13	New Orleans	7:30
Nov. 15	Phoenix	8:00
Nov. 17	Dallas	7:00
Nov. 19	at San Antonio	9:30
Nov. 20	Portland	8:00
Nov. 25	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 27	at Golden State	10:00
Nov. 29	at L.A. Lakers	10:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Houston	7:00
Dec. 3	Utah	8:00
Dec. 5	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 7	at New Orleans	7:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	at Orlando	7:00
Dec. 20	at Miami	8:00
Dec. 23	Washington	8:00
Dec. 26	at Indiana	7:00
Dec. 28	at Charlotte	6:00
Dec. 29	Memphis	7:00
Dec. 31	Minnesota	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Jan. 3	New York	8:00
Jan. 5	Boston	3:30
Jan. 8	at Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 10	at New York	7:30
Jan. 12	at Washington	6:00
Jan. 14	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 16	Cleveland	8:00
Jan. 17	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 19	Brooklyn	7:00
Jan. 22	Utah	8:00
Jan. 23	Dallas	8:00
Jan. 26	at Portland	6:00
Jan. 29	at Golden State	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Sacramento	8:00
Feb. 3	Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 5	Phoenix	8:00
Feb. 7	Toronto	8:00
Feb. 8	at Memphis	8:00
Feb. 10	New Orleans	8:00
Feb. 12	Miami	8:00
Feb. 13	at Minnesota	9:30

Feb. 21	at Utah	9:30
Feb. 23	at Minnesota	9:30
Feb. 24	Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 26	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 28	at Atlanta	7:30

MARCH

March 2	at San Antonio	7:00
March 3	Houston	8:00
March 5	at Memphis	8:00
March 7	Portland	8:00
March 9	Denver	1:00
March 10	Denver	8:00
March 12	at Boston	7:30
March 15	at Detroit	7:00
March 16	at Milwaukee	9:00
March 19	Philadelphia	8:00
March 21	Charlotte	8:00
March 23	at L.A. Clippers	9:00
March 25	at Sacramento	10:00
March 27	Memphis	8:00
March 29	Indiana	8:00
March 31	Chicago	8:00

APRIL

April 2	Detroit	8:00
April 4	at Houston	8:00
April 6	L.A. Lakers	3:30
April 8	L.A. Lakers	8:00
April 9	at Phoenix	10:00
April 11	at Utah	9:30
April 13	at New Orleans	3:30

All times Eastern



NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **5TH**

POR TRAIL BLAZERS

Is it more of the same or something new for fans of this team? That's the question when it comes to this year's Portland Trail Blazers, and it's one that those beyond the franchise's inner circle will be asking themselves as the regular season approaches.

For the better part of the past two seasons, the Blazers have been losing, and to some extent doing so by design, since the team's ownership and management made the decision to move on from franchise stalwart Damian Lillard, collect assets and begin a new and — they hope — more successful era of Rip City basketball.

But while team executives — and ownership to a limited extent — have been talking the talk about building a winner from the ground up, it's time for those same constituents to start walking the walk.

On paper, they have some intriguing pieces.

Anfernee Simons is 25 and entering his seventh NBA season, and over the past two seasons, he has proven to be a viable and blossoming scorer in the league.

Additionally, Shaedon Sharpe boasts dazzling athleticism; 2023 first-round draft choice Scoot Henderson showed glimpses of All-Star talent throughout his rookie campaign; Deandre Ayton was the first overall pick in the 2018 NBA Draft; Jerami Grant is a legitimate veteran piece; and rookie Donovan Clingan comported himself well as a shot-blocker and rebounder in summer league.

The problem is, the game's not played on paper, and on the court this team appears far closer to an ongoing project than a finished one.

FRONTCOURT

This is where things get interesting for Portland, primarily due to the enigma that is Ayton, secondarily as a result of the youth and inexperience of Clingan, and lastly due to the cosmic forces that seem to turn Blazers centers from athletic freaks of nature into broken lawn chairs.

The sad saga started with Bill Walton and progressed to Sam Bowie, Greg Oden and Zach Collins. The great Northwest isn't so great for 7-foot basketball players, be they generational talents, everyday starters or simply stop-gaps to bigger and better things.



JERAMI GRANT

SCOUTING THE TRAIL BLAZERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"They seem to have both hands on the wheel and their foot on the gas in steering toward the lottery. ... Honestly, nothing wrong with that. May as well figure out what you have in Scoot Henderson, Shaedon Sharpe, Anfernee Simons and [rookie] Donovan Clingan, and some others, and take it from there. ... I'm not really sure that Jerami Grant has a place here, though he seems to be OK with the situation. He's a really good player who keeps getting stuck in losing situations. I could see a trade there. ... It'll just be more of the same. Lots of developing and lots of losing. That's fine, but eventually it costs people jobs."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 35-39
DIVISION: 4TH

2020-21
Record: 42-30
DIVISION: 3RD

2021-22
Record: 27-55
DIVISION: 4TH

2022-23
Record: 33-49
DIVISION: 5TH

2023-24
Record: 21-61
DIVISION: 5TH

FROM LEFT: PETRE THOMAS-USA TODAY SPORTS; KAMIL KRZACZYNSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS



ANFERNEE SIMONS



BEYOND THE ARC

Knight in shining armor? With owner Jody Allen's proposed interest in selling the team, Nike co-founder Phil Knight has been rumored to have interest in purchasing it. As a native Oregonian with a vested interest in the team, Knight has fans hopeful that the sneaker mogul will someday be pulling the strings of the beloved local franchise.

Statue for Blazer greats? Could there soon be a memorial commemorating the franchise's high point? Shortly following the death of Bill Walton this past spring, long-time Oregon senator Ron Wyden offered the following: "In that magical 1976-77 season with the Trail Blazers, Bill and new teammate Maurice Lucas befriended each other — a white man and a Black man — confounding some analysts' predictions they'd clash with each other. Instead, they formed a dominating scoring and rebounding tandem of big men who powered Portland to a title and showed a largely white state the strength of friendship and teamwork between two talented men of different races."

Bigfoot sighting The Trail Blazers are known for two mascots: Blaze the Trail Cat and Douglas Fur, a hipster, beanie-wearing Bigfoot who's said to dwell in an urban forest in the outskirts of Portland.



With that said, Ayton is the unquestioned starter if he makes it to opening day. Like Simons, his name repeatedly has been mentioned in trade talks, but while there are a handful of contending teams who'd value the center to bolster frontcourt depth, few if any would be interested in doing so at a price tag that equals roughly \$70 million over the next two seasons.

But, if Ayton were to go, it would open up minutes for Clingan, who likely would be paired with Robert Williams III or Duop Reath in the big-man rotation, with a potential new signee or player coming over via trade.

Ultimately, outside of Ayton, this is an offensively challenged frontline until Clingan is able to build and polish an offensive attack that will make him a threat on both ends of the floor.

BACKCOURT

The elephant in the room for the Trail Blazers continues to be redundancy on the perimeter, and the fly in that ointment remains Simons.

Simons is a good player who could find his way into a number of the league's starting lineups, but on a Portland roster building for the future, he provides more value by way of a return in a trade-to-be-named-later.

With Henderson presenting as the point guard of the future, Sharpe penciled in at the shooting guard position and Simons being four years Sharpe's senior and having two years left on a fairly reasonable contract, it appears that Simons' days are numbered in a Blazer uniform. He averaged 22.6 points, 3.6 rebounds and 5.5 assists last season, while shooting 43 percent from the field and 38.5 percent from beyond the arc. Those are real numbers in a league now built from the outside in, which is why the NBA rumor mill has whispered his name for the better part of the summer.

Simons is good enough for contenders to be interested in him and young enough for rebuilding teams closer to the finish line than the start to consider acquiring him.

For the Trail Blazers, shipping Simons would clear the deck for what they

13
Shaedon Sharpe, Scoot Henderson and Anfernee Simons only played in 13 games together last season due to a variety of injuries, and in those games, the team finished 2-11. Clearly that's not a big sample size, but it also firmly puts into question the trio's ability to succeed together.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

1. Donovan Clingan
C, 7-2, 290, UConn

In a historically weak draft, and from where Portland was drafting, it's fairly easy to make the case that they maximized their position. Clingan showed the potential of becoming one of the best players in this draft with his shot-blocking and interior presence in summer league.

Other Newcomers

Portland traded the draft rights to Carlton "Bub" Carrington (the 14th overall pick), a future first- and two second-round picks, and guard Malcolm Brogdon to Washington for 6-foot-7 small forward Deni Avdija, who averaged 14.7 points, 7.2 rebounds and 3.8 assists per game last season.

ROSTER																48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY			
HEAD COACH: CHAUNCEY BILLUPS (4TH SEASON; CAREER: 81-165)																2023-24 STATISTICS			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
1	Anfernee Simons	G	6-3	193	6/08/99	Edgewater (FL) HS	6	46	34.4	.430	.385	.916	3.6	5.5	22.6		5.1	7.7	31.5
9	Jerami Grant	F	6-7	210	3/12/94	Syracuse	10	54	33.9	.451	.402	.817	3.5	2.8	21.0		5.0	4.0	29.7
2	Deandre Ayton	C	7-0	247	7/23/98	Arizona	6	55	32.4	.570	.100	.823	11.1	1.6	16.7		16.4	2.4	24.8
17	Shaedon Sharpe	G	6-5	205	5/30/03	Kentucky	2	32	33.1	.406	.333	.824	5.0	2.9	15.9		7.3	4.3	23.1
8	Deni Avdija	F	6-9	210	1/03/01	Maccabi Tel Aviv	4	75	30.1	.506	.374	.740	7.2	3.8	14.7		11.5	6.1	23.4
00	Scoot Henderson	G	6-3	202	2/03/04	G League Ignite	1	62	28.5	.385	.325	.819	3.1	5.4	14.0		5.3	9.1	23.6
5	Dalano Banton	F	6-8	204	11/07/99	Nebraska	3	54	19.4	.404	.296	.783	3.3	2.4	10.3		8.2	5.8	25.5
26	Duop Reath	C	6-9	245	6/26/96	LSU	1	68	17.9	.461	.359	.742	3.7	1.0	9.1		9.9	2.6	24.4
34	Jabari Walker	F	6-7	227	7/30/02	Colorado	2	72	23.6	.460	.295	.754	7.1	1.0	8.9		14.3	2.0	18.0
33	Toumani Camara	F	6-7	226	5/08/00	Dayton	1	70	24.8	.450	.337	.758	4.9	1.2	7.5		9.5	2.4	14.5
35	Robert Williams III	C/F	6-9	249	10/17/97	Texas A&M	6	6	19.8	.654	.000	.778	6.3	0.8	6.8		15.4	2.0	16.6
8	Kris Murray	F	6-8	210	8/19/00	Iowa	1	62	21.7	.396	.268	.661	3.6	1.3	6.1		8.0	2.8	13.4
4	Matisse Thybulle	G/F	6-5	201	3/04/97	Washington	5	65	22.9	.397	.346	.759	2.1	1.4	5.4		4.4	2.9	11.4
7	Bryce McGowens	G	6-6	175	11/08/02	Nebraska	2	59	14.9	.439	.333	.776	1.7	0.9	5.1		5.6	2.8	16.4
4	Devonte' Graham	G	6-1	195	2/22/95	Kansas	6	23	13.6	.352	.301	.813	1.6	2.1	5.0		5.5	7.5	17.5
72	Rayan Rupert	G/F	6-6	185	5/31/04	New Zealand Breakers	1	39	16.2	.335	.359	.760	2.4	1.6	4.0		7.0	4.7	11.7
24	Justin Minaya	F	6-5	205	3/26/99	Providence	2	34	11.2	.297	.245	.556	1.6	0.6	1.8		7.1	2.6	7.7
23	Donovan Clingan	C	7-2	280	2/23/04	Connecticut		R — First NBA Season											



DEANDRE AYTON

hope is a future backcourt of Henderson and Sharpe and ideally returns assets that can be used down the line.

Portland bolstered its play at small forward with the acquisition of Deni Avdija, who joined the team by way of a draft-day trade with the Washington Wizards in return for a package that included veteran guard Malcolm Brogdon.

Avdija should make for a nice addition to a lineup desperate for offensive production at the wing while also providing an efficient and intelligent option in lieu of a true facilitator at the guard position. The five-year veteran doesn't demand shots, but he does convert them.

The addition of Avdija also all but seals the fate of veteran Jerami Grant, who is a solid NBA player but has little value on a team building from the ground up.

FINAL ANALYSIS

This team is simply a work in progress.

Maybe the Blazers have their backcourt of the future in Sharpe and Henderson; maybe Avdija is a legitimate answer on the wing; and maybe Clingan can work his way into being a starting NBA center. That's a lot of maybes, and those questions point to another year of losing basketball in Portland.

Barring an early-season chemistry miracle, Grant, Simons, Ayton or all three will be wearing new uniforms by the trade deadline, and Blazers fans can only hope that in the wake of the departures, they get pieces or assets that align with their young cogs.

A player or two? A draft pick worthy of a future starter? Either might offer hope for moving the post-Lillard project along on the road back to the postseason. But for a proud franchise and a city that has a love-hate relationship with it, it also might not.

And yes, that's a tough place to be in today's NBA.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Golden State	10:00
Oct. 25	New Orleans	10:00
Oct. 27	New Orleans	6:00
Oct. 28	at Sacramento	10:00
Oct. 30	at L.A. Clippers	10:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Oklahoma City	10:00
Nov. 2	at Phoenix	10:00
Nov. 4	at New Orleans	9:30
Nov. 7	at San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 8	at Minnesota	9:00
Nov. 10	Memphis	9:00
Nov. 12	Minnesota	10:00
Nov. 13	Minnesota	10:00
Nov. 17	Atlanta	6:00
Nov. 20	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Nov. 22	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 23	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 25	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 27	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 29	Sacramento	10:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Dallas	9:00
Dec. 3	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Dec. 6	Utah	10:00
Dec. 8	at L.A. Lakers	9:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	Denver	10:00
Dec. 21	at San Antonio	8:30
Dec. 23	at Dallas	8:30
Dec. 26	Utah	10:00
Dec. 28	Dallas	10:00
Dec. 30	Philadelphia	10:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 4	at Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 6	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 8	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 9	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 11	Miami	10:00
Jan. 14	Brooklyn	10:00
Jan. 16	L.A. Clippers	10:00
Jan. 18	Houston	10:00
Jan. 19	Chicago	9:00
Jan. 21	at Miami	7:30
Jan. 23	at Orlando	7:00
Jan. 24	at Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 26	Oklahoma City	6:00
Jan. 28	Milwaukee	10:00
Jan. 30	Orlando	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Phoenix	10:00
Feb. 3	Phoenix	10:00
Feb. 4	Indiana	10:00
Feb. 6	Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 8	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 10	at Denver	9:00
Feb. 12	at Denver	9:00

Feb. 20	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Feb. 22	Charlotte	10:00
Feb. 24	at Utah	9:00
Feb. 26	at Washington	7:00
Feb. 28	at Brooklyn	7:30

MARCH

March 2	at Cleveland	3:30
March 3	at Philadelphia	7:00
March 5	at Boston	7:00
March 7	at Oklahoma City	8:00
March 9	Detroit	9:00
March 10	at Golden State	10:00
March 12	New York	10:00
March 16	Toronto	6:00
March 18	Washington	10:00
March 19	Memphis	10:00
March 21	Denver	10:00
March 23	Boston	6:00
March 25	Cleveland	10:00
March 27	at Sacramento	10:00
March 30	at New York	6:00

APRIL

April 1	at Atlanta	7:30
April 3	at Toronto	7:30
April 4	at Chicago	8:00
April 6	San Antonio	6:00
April 9	at Utah	9:00
April 11	Golden State	10:00
April 13	L.A. Lakers	3:30

All times Eastern



UTA JAZZ

The Utah Jazz provided clarity on one front. They will not open the 2024-25 season with a complete roster overhaul after trading their star player. Instead, the Jazz and Lauri Markkanen agreed to a five-year, \$238 million extension.

The move signifies two things. One, the Jazz cannot trade Markkanen at any point during the 2024-25 season because of when he agreed to the deal. Two, Utah rewarded Markkanen with a handsome contract and relative security after his two breakout seasons included an NBA All-Star appearance and the league's Most Improved Player award.

Where will the Jazz go from here? Will they try to land a second All-Star-level complementary player? Will they make less dramatic deals to clear up space and collect more draft picks? Or will they keep the roster as constructed to improve their lottery odds for the 2025 draft? The Jazz appear flexible with these options.

FRONTCOURT

Regardless, the Jazz's identity mostly will revolve around Markkanen. After experiencing uneven roles and organizational turbulence in Chicago (2017-21), Markkanen found solid footing in Cleveland (2021-22) and over the past two seasons in Utah. He has developed into the perfect modern-day big man. He can dominate in the post. He can stretch the floor with spacing and superior shooting. He can bang with physical bigs inside. He can defend perimeter players. He thrives as the No. 1 option, although he neither minds nor craves the extra attention.

The contract extension partly reflects Utah's appreciation and trust in Markkanen's growth. But although he's just one season removed from an All-Star selection, he is not a superstar.

That sets up a challenging dynamic. The Jazz don't have enough experience and talent to complement Markkanen's skill set. Still, Utah has some intriguing frontcourt options. After the Jazz acquired him from Atlanta in the 2023 offseason, center John Collins experienced various hiccups, but he eventually showed dependability as a rim protector and outside shooter. Markkanen and Collins have coexisted because they both possess modern NBA big-man skills.



COLLIN SEXTON

SCOUTING THE JAZZ

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Signing Lauri Markkanen to that extension was a good start. Now, what's next? ... With everyone healthy, this is close to a .500 team. I just don't know if they want to be that good or play the lottery. I don't know that they know. ... They have a lot of players who are the same in terms of how much they will actually help you. Keyonte George showed a lot of promise as a rookie, but Collin Sexton is what he is. Same goes for Jordan Clarkson. ... Basically, outside of Markkanen and probably George, I'm wondering if anyone on this team will still be here in two years. They just seem like they still have a lot to figure out."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 44-28
DIVISION: 3RD

2020-21
Record: 52-20
DIVISION: 1ST

2021-22
Record: 49-33
DIVISION: 1ST

2022-23
Record: 37-45
DIVISION: 4TH

2023-24
Record: 31-51
DIVISION: 4TH

FROM LEFT: DARREN YAMASHITA-USA TODAY SPORTS; JEREMY REPER-USA TODAY SPORTS



LAURI MARKKANEN



BEYOND THE ARC

Youth movement Utah's roster has seven picks from the past three NBA drafts — Keyonte George, Walker Kessler, Cody Williams, Taylor Hendricks, Isaiah Collier, Kyle Filipowski and Brice Sensabaugh. All of those players also competed in summer league and likely will receive extensive minutes this season.

On ice Beyond money and security, Lauri Markkanen has another reason to feel happy about his contract. Markkanen will play in Utah the same season it welcomes its new NHL team. He played organized hockey growing up in Finland. He also attended Chicago Blackhawks games when he played with the Bulls (2017-21), but he told reporters last season that he didn't have a favorite team. Perhaps he does now.

Man's best friend

Whether playing the G League or with the Jazz, George finds balance by spending time with his Doberman, Duke. "He don't care if you won or lost, he don't care if you had 40 and 30, or 10," George told reporters. "He's just happy you're back at home."

Last man standing Entering his 11th NBA season and sixth in Utah, Jordan Clarkson has become the Jazz's longest-tenured player. Since Utah acquired Clarkson in a trade from Cleveland in the 2019-20 season, the Jazz have made 15 other trades, including the Rudy Gobert and Donovan Mitchell deals.





JOHN COLLINS

secondary scoring can come in waves, Clarkson always has remained professional with his attitude and work habits. Through scoring streaks and mistakes, Clarkson tries to play the right way. The Jazz are not invested in this season's results because of realistic expectations and lottery implications. But they should prioritize boosting Clarkson's value so they can deal him for more assets before the trade deadline.

Presuming Utah trades Sexton and/or Clarkson, Jazz head coach Will Hardy will expand George's role even more and might open up additional minutes to rookie shooting guard Isaiah Collier, who likely will make an immediate defensive impact with his athleticism and strength, but he needs to work on shooting and playmaking. Collier impressed NBA front offices with his competitiveness, which suggests he has the right work ethic to address his weaknesses.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Jazz are clearly using the 2024-25 season as a transitional year. Markkanen will seek to establish himself as a perennial All-Star-caliber player. The Jazz will rely on solid veterans to play well enough to boost their trade value, but not enough to win many basketball games. Utah will give its young players increased on-court reps to expedite their development. That approach naturally will lead to losses. Through it all, Markkanen can become the Jazz's linchpin as the No. 1 option, a dependable teammate for veterans and a reliable mentor for young players.

The endgame for the franchise is simple: The Jazz want to stay in the Cooper Flagg sweepstakes and retain enough assets to make another big move through free agency or trade. So the Jazz shouldn't be judged this season on their record. (It'll likely be bad.) Instead, progress should be evaluated by how Markkanen grows, how the young players develop and whether the front office can pull off any impactful moves.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Memphis	9:00
Oct. 25	Golden State	9:30
Oct. 28	at Dallas	8:30
Oct. 29	Sacramento	9:00
Oct. 31	San Antonio	9:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Denver	10:00
Nov. 4	at Chicago	8:30
Nov. 7	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 9	at San Antonio	5:00
Nov. 12	Phoenix	9:00
Nov. 14	Dallas	9:00
Nov. 16	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 17	at L.A. Clippers	9:00
Nov. 19	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Nov. 21	at San Antonio	9:00
Nov. 23	New York	5:00
Nov. 26	San Antonio	9:00
Nov. 27	Denver	9:00
Nov. 30	Dallas	9:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Dec. 3	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Dec. 6	at Portland	10:00
Dec. 8	at Sacramento	9:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	at Detroit	7:00
Dec. 21	at Brooklyn	7:30
Dec. 23	at Cleveland	7:00
Dec. 26	at Portland	10:00
Dec. 28	Philadelphia	9:30
Dec. 30	Denver	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at New York	7:30
Jan. 4	at Miami	8:00
Jan. 5	at Orlando	6:30
Jan. 7	Atlanta	9:00
Jan. 9	Miami	9:00
Jan. 11	at Phoenix	5:00
Jan. 12	Brooklyn	8:00
Jan. 15	Charlotte	9:00
Jan. 17	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 20	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 22	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 23	Washington	9:00
Jan. 25	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 27	Milwaukee	9:00
Jan. 28	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 30	Minnesota	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Orlando	5:00
Feb. 3	Indiana	9:00
Feb. 5	Golden State	9:00
Feb. 7	at Phoenix	10:00
Feb. 8	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Feb. 11	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Feb. 12	L.A. Lakers	9:00

Feb. 21	Oklahoma City	9:30
Feb. 22	Houston	9:30
Feb. 24	Portland	9:00
Feb. 26	Sacramento	9:00
Feb. 28	Minnesota	9:30

MARCH

March 2	New Orleans	8:00
March 3	Detroit	9:30
March 5	at Washington	7:00
March 7	at Toronto	7:30
March 9	at Philadelphia	7:30
March 10	at Boston	7:30
March 12	at Memphis	8:00
March 14	Toronto	9:30
March 16	at Minnesota	7:00
March 17	Chicago	9:00
March 19	L.A. Clippers	9:00
March 21	Boston	9:30
March 23	Cleveland	3:30
March 25	Memphis	9:00
March 27	Houston	9:00
March 28	at Denver	9:00
March 31	at Charlotte	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at Houston	8:00
April 4	at Indiana	7:00
April 6	at Atlanta	6:00
April 9	Portland	9:00
April 11	Oklahoma City	9:30
April 13	at Minnesota	3:30

All times Eastern



GS WARRIORS



ANDREW WIGGINS

SCOUTING THE WARRIORS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

“What are we doing here? I understand wanting to keep Steph Curry and Draymond Green, but it just seems to me they are doing so at the expense of the future. ... They may be better served to move on from Andrew Wiggins and give those minutes to Jonathan Kuminga. You’re not challenging for a title anymore, so why not start playing guys who are your future? ... Buddy Hield, Kyle Anderson and De’Anthony Melton were nice pickups. Klay Thompson is no great loss. Nevertheless, the Warriors have become a one-man team, and that one man (Curry) is 36 years old.”

During their dynasty, “Strength in Numbers” was more than just a slogan for the Golden State Warriors. It was their ethos. While the core of Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson, Kevin Durant and Draymond Green led the charge in those championship runs, the seamless fit of players such as Andre Iguodala, Shaun Livingston and Andrew Bogut helped boost the franchise with complementary skills. Those Warriors had the luxury of being able to start games lackadaisically before flipping the third-quarter switch. Their role players provided a jolt with buckets and swarming defense that led to even more buckets in transition as they cruised to myriad wins.

However, nothing in sports stays the same. The Western Conference is becoming younger and better, and the Warriors have failed to adapt.

Golden State has missed the playoffs three times in the past five seasons. Thompson left for the Dallas Mavericks in free agency during the offseason, and now it’s up to the younger players to make a leap to complement an aging Curry and Green. For the 2024-25 Warriors, it isn’t about “Strength in Numbers” anymore. It’s about the strengths and weaknesses of some largely unproven players who will determine their season.

FRONTCOURT

In his 13th season, Green is still the anchor of this unit. Offensively, he’s can still facilitate and push the pace in transition. Last season, he also made an effort to be more involved in auxiliary scoring. He posted the best 3-point shooting of his career at 39.5 percent. Granted, Green averaged only 8.6 points per game, but there were games in which he took advantage of open looks and recorded double-digit outings. With a lack of a consistent second option, Green must capitalize on opportunities to score.

Green is still the Warriors’ best defender, holding a net defensive rating of 110.7. He’s most disruptive when there’s freedom to roam, as opposed to having to compensate for blown rotations in zone coverage.

Health and availability are the biggest concerns with Green. Years of playing small-ball center and some questionable behavior are taking a toll. Green played only

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 15-50
DIVISION: 5TH

2020-21
Record: 39-33
DIVISION: 4TH

2021-22
Record: 53-29
DIVISION: 2ND

2022-23
Record: 44-38
DIVISION: 4TH

2023-24
Record: 46-36
DIVISION: 5TH

FROM LEFT: CARY EDMONDSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; GEOFF BURKE-USA TODAY SPORTS



STEPHEN CURRY



BEYOND THE ARC

Blown leads Last season, the Warriors lost 13 games in which they were ahead by 12 points or more. The meltdowns are something to keep note of for the season ahead.

New blood The biggest offseason acquisitions for the Warriors might be on the coaching staff. Replacing Kenny Atkinson on the bench are Terry Stotts and Jerry Stackhouse. Stotts coached in Portland for nine seasons and can breathe new life into the Warriors offense. Stackhouse is a well-respected NBA vet and 2017 G League Coach of the Year. He's expected to work with the wings.

Wasting Green Draymond Green lost nearly \$1.9 million in salary during the 12-game suspension for the Dec. 12 incident in which he punched Phoenix Suns center Jusuf Nurkić in the face. Green also served a five-game suspension for placing Minnesota Timberwolves center Rudy Gobert in a chokehold on Nov. 14.

Clutch Curry Stephen Curry earned the NBA's 2023-24 Clutch Player of the Year award. It's nothing new. Curry has the most game-winning shots in the final five seconds of the fourth quarter and overtime over the past decade with 10, including two last season. Fortunately for Team USA, he took his clutch gene with him to Paris, where he led a huge comeback win over Serbia and then put on a dazzling show against France in the gold medal game.



55 games last season due to lengthy suspensions. The Warriors will need him healthy and playing under control if they are going to contend for a playoff spot.

Andrew Wiggins returns as the starting small forward and is looking for a bounce-back season. The 2022 All-Star took a leave of absence to deal with a personal matter for a second season in a row and labored through a campaign in which he averaged 13.2 points per game. When Wiggins played, he often was passive and unfocused on both ends of the floor. The Warriors need him to be aggressive.

Jonathan Kuminga made the most of his opportunities, averaging 21.9 points per 36 minutes. He was the only Warrior who could consistently put pressure on the rim with drives and dunks. He also can draw contact. The concern with Kuminga is his defense. He struggles in defending off the ball and with closeouts. He also has a habit of biting on pump fakes. Moving forward, Kuminga must be more disciplined defensively as he continues to carve out a niche in the rotation.

Kevon Looney and Trayce Jackson-Davis are also back. Looney is looking to return to the rotation after playing himself out of it last season. Jackson-Davis is looking for more consistent minutes.

BACKCOURT

Curry is 36 and shouldn't have to carry the Warriors offense single-handedly. On the other hand, Curry has enough left in the tank to do it if necessary. Still, last season's numbers — 26.4 points per game, shooting splits of 45/41/92 — were a bit pedestrian by his standards. Now that Thompson is gone, Curry will have to shoulder more of a scoring burden than ever before and also win battles of attrition. Opposing defense will use Curry's off-ball style against him and make him defend, which will wear him down as games progress.

Brandin Podziemski hustled his way into the rotation and is the incumbent at the 2. He's a solid ball-handler and facilitator, and he knows when to hit Curry with the timely pass. At 6-foot-5, he's also a good rebounder for his size and led

31.9%

Draymond Green had the highest transition turnover rate in the NBA last season at 31.9 percent. In fact, he's had a transition turnover mark greater than 30 percent for the past six seasons. That said, a high turnover rate isn't unusual in a fast-paced, pass-heavy offense.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

1. Quinten Post
F/C, 7'0, 238, Boston College

After Post was selected, he was traded to the Portland Trail Blazers briefly in a four-team trade for Lindy Waters but was then traded back to the Warriors for cash. Post can stretch the floor with his shooting, and he's not afraid of physical play.

Other Newcomers

To offset the loss of Klay Thompson, the Warriors signed veteran guards Buddy Hield and De'Anthony Melton. They also signed Kyle Anderson from Minnesota. The 6-foot-9 forward will help bolster the frontcourt with depth and defense.

ROSTER																	2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: STEVE KERR (11TH SEASON; CAREER: 519-274)																													
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS										
30	Stephen Curry	G	6-2	185	3/14/88	Davidson	15	74	32.7	.450	.408	.923	4.5	5.1	26.4		6.5	7.5	38.8										
00	Jonathan Kuminga	F	6-7	225	10/06/02	G League Ignite	3	74	26.3	.529	.321	.746	4.8	2.2	16.1		8.7	4.0	29.3										
22	Andrew Wiggins	F	6-7	197	2/23/95	Kansas	10	71	27.0	.453	.358	.751	4.5	1.7	13.2		8.0	3.0	23.5										
7	Buddy Hield	G	6-4	220	12/17/92	Oklahoma	8	84	25.7	.436	.386	.881	3.2	2.8	12.1		6.0	5.2	22.5										
8	De'Anthony Melton	G	6-3	200	5/28/98	USC	6	38	26.9	.386	.360	.835	3.7	3.0	11.1		6.6	5.3	19.7										
2	Brandin Podziemski	G	6-4	205	2/25/03	Santa Clara	1	74	26.6	.454	.385	.633	5.8	3.7	9.2		10.4	6.7	16.6										
23	Draymond Green	F	6-6	230	3/04/90	Michigan State	12	55	27.1	.497	.395	.730	7.2	6.0	8.6		12.8	10.7	15.3										
4	Moses Moody	G	6-5	211	5/31/02	Arkansas	3	66	17.5	.462	.360	.785	3.0	0.9	8.1		8.1	2.4	22.1										
32	Trayce Jackson-Davis	F	6-9	245	2/22/00	Indiana	1	68	16.6	.702	.000	.561	5.0	1.2	7.9		14.5	3.5	22.9										
1	Kyle Anderson	F/G	6-9	230	9/20/93	UCLA	10	79	22.6	.460	.229	.708	3.5	4.2	6.4		7.4	8.9	13.6										
0	Gary Payton II	G	6-2	195	12/01/92	Oregon State	8	44	15.5	.563	.364	.609	2.6	1.1	5.5		8.0	3.4	16.9										
5	Kevon Looney	F	6-9	222	2/06/96	UCLA	9	74	16.1	.597	.000	.675	5.7	1.8	4.5		16.8	5.3	13.4										
15	Gui Santos	F	6-6	185	6/22/02	Minas	1	23	8.4	.509	.370	.941	2.1	0.6	3.6		12.2	3.5	20.5										
43	Lindy Waters III	F	6-6	210	7/28/97	Oklahoma State	3	38	7.4	.471	.435	1.000	1.1	0.6	3.6		6.9	4.1	23.5										
61	Pat Spencer	G	6-3	205	7/04/96	Northwestern	1	6	4.3	.500	.000	.000	0.7	0.8	0.7		7.5	9.4	7.5										
3	Reece Beekman	G	6-3	190	10/08/01	Virginia		R — First NBA Season																					
	Jackson Rowe	F	6-7	210	1/04/97	Cal State-Fullerton		R — First NBA Season																					
29	Daeqwon Plowden	G/F	6-6	216	8/29/98	Bowling Green		R — First NBA Season																					
21	Quinten Post	C	7-0	238	3/21/00	Boston College		R — First NBA Season																					



JONATHAN KUMINGA

the team in plus/minus (+3.6). However, the issue with a starting backcourt of Podziemski and Curry is that it's easier for opposing offenses to attack. It would be better for the Warriors if there were an open competition for the 2. New-comers Buddy Hield and De'Anthony Melton may be better fits because they provide more spacing and offense (Hield) and better defense (Melton).

The underused Moses Moody might be an even better fit alongside Curry. Moody has the tools to be a solid 3-and-D wing for the Warriors. Despite being used sparingly, the third-year guard out of Arkansas shot a respectable 46.2 percent from the field and held his own defensively. Warriors head coach Steve Kerr has nothing to lose by carving out rotational minutes for Moody.

Gary Payton II also returns. Like Podziemski, the 6-foot-2 Payton plays bigger than his size and is a connector. Unlike Podziemski, Payton is more of a defender than a facilitator, but he also can score on occasion. After an injury-plagued season, look for Payton to return to form.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Warriors have been trying to win while also developing for the future. The problem with that approach is that the development has been largely nonexistent. Instead of prepping the Jonathan Kumingas and Moses Moodys of the world to step up, Kerr gave them DNPs and little to no run in past seasons. Now, when the team needs a consistent and competent infusion of youth to bolster its legendary veteran core, it might be relying on these younger players to take an unrealistic leap to compete.

The addition of other vets around the margins to complement Curry and Green is a savvy move given the team's financial constraints. However, it may not be enough to contend for a top-six spot in a stacked Western Conference.

On the other hand, it wouldn't be wise to count out a team led by Curry.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Portland	10:00
Oct. 25	at Utah	9:30
Oct. 27	L.A. Clippers	8:30
Oct. 29	New Orleans	10:00
Oct. 30	New Orleans	10:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 4	at Washington	7:15
Nov. 6	at Boston	7:30
Nov. 8	at Cleveland	7:30
Nov. 10	at Oklahoma City	7:00
Nov. 12	Dallas	10:00
Nov. 15	Memphis	10:00
Nov. 18	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 20	Atlanta	10:00
Nov. 22	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 23	at San Antonio	8:30
Nov. 25	Brooklyn	10:00
Nov. 27	Oklahoma City	10:00
Nov. 30	at Phoenix	9:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 3	at Denver	10:00
Dec. 5	Houston	10:00
Dec. 6	Minnesota	10:00
Dec. 8	Minnesota	8:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	

Dec. 19	at Memphis	8:00
Dec. 21	at Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 23	Indiana	10:00
Dec. 25	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Dec. 27	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
Dec. 28	Phoenix	8:30
Dec. 30	Cleveland	10:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Philadelphia	10:00
Jan. 4	Memphis	8:30
Jan. 5	Sacramento	8:30
Jan. 7	Miami	10:00
Jan. 9	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 10	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 13	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 15	at Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 18	Washington	8:30
Jan. 20	Boston	5:00
Jan. 22	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 23	Chicago	10:00
Jan. 25	L.A. Lakers	8:30
Jan. 28	Utah	10:00
Jan. 29	Oklahoma City	10:00
Jan. 31	Phoenix	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 3	Orlando	10:00
Feb. 5	at Utah	9:00
Feb. 6	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Feb. 8	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 10	at Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 12	at Dallas	9:30

Feb. 13	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 21	at Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 23	Dallas	3:30
Feb. 25	Charlotte	10:00
Feb. 27	at Orlando	7:00

MARCH

March 1	at Philadelphia	8:30
March 3	at Charlotte	7:00
March 4	at New York	7:30
March 6	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 8	Detroit	8:30
March 10	Portland	10:00
March 13	Sacramento	10:00
March 15	New York	8:30
March 17	Denver	10:00
March 19	Toronto	10:00
March 20	Milwaukee	10:00
March 22	at Atlanta	7:00
March 25	at Miami	7:30
March 28	at New Orleans	8:00
March 30	at San Antonio	7:00

APRIL

April 1	at Memphis	8:00
April 3	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
April 4	Denver	10:00
April 6	Houston	8:30
April 8	at Phoenix	10:00
April 9	San Antonio	10:00
April 11	at Portland	10:00
April 13	L.A. Clippers	3:30

All times Eastern



PACIFIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

LA CLIPPERS

For the past five years, the Los Angeles Clippers were considered NBA championship contenders because of the dynamic two-way talents of Kawhi Leonard and Paul George.

That will not be the case for the 2024-25 version of the Clippers.

George's departure to the Philadelphia 76ers on a four-year, \$212 million deal that the Clippers were unwilling to match will leave them competing for the sixth spot at best in the uber-competitive Western Conference.

The Clippers do return Leonard, James Harden and head coach Tyronn Lue, considered one of the five best coaches in the NBA, whom the Clippers locked up with a five-year extension worth about \$70 million, to lead the way.

Even with the Clippers possessing more than their share of shortcomings, the most important person in their hierarchy has kept his faith in the club.

"I think we're going to be a very, very good team," Clippers owner Steve Ballmer says. "We're going to contend. We'll see how far it takes us. There's a lot of good teams in the West, let alone you've got the (NBA champion) Celtics, etc., in the East. But there are a lot of good teams. I think we are one of them, and if we stay healthy, if we play well, I think every team's got to get a little bit of luck. But our two guys at the top are pretty good, and I'll take our guys that we flank around them."



IVICA ZUBAC

SCOUTING THE CLIPPERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Obviously, they can't go anywhere if Kawhi Leonard can't stay healthy. I wonder if that knee issue isn't a long-term thing, though. ... Leonard and [James] Harden are on the decline, and I don't know if even the front office and coaching staff truly believe this team is a contender. ... They have some nice players around Leonard and Harden; I just don't know if it's enough to get out of the West. ... I think by midseason they could realize it's time for a change. ... As constructed, I think they're headed for another four or five finish in the West and first-round exit."

FRONTCOURT

Let's be real here: Everything for the Clippers revolves around the health of Leonard, and it's been his Achilles heel during his five seasons in Los Angeles. There was an ominous note for Leonard and the Clippers this summer when USA Basketball sent him home from training camp in July over concerns about his right knee, with the organization saying it was best for him to prepare for the upcoming season by getting the knee healthy.

Leonard played in 68 games last season, his most appearances as a Clipper and the most since he played 74 games for the San Antonio Spurs during the 2016-17 season. But he missed four of the Clippers' six playoff games against the Mavericks and the final eight regular-season games with inflammation in his right knee.

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 49-23
DIVISION: 2ND

2020-21
Record: 47-25
DIVISION: 2ND

2021-22
Record: 42-40
DIVISION: 3RD

2022-23
Record: 44-38
DIVISION: 3RD

2023-24
Record: 51-31
DIVISION: 1ST

FROM LEFT: JEROME MIRON-USA TODAY SPORTS; BILL STREICHER-USA TODAY SPORTS



KAWHI LEONARD



BEYOND THE ARC

Money can't buy you everything Steve Ballmer is the richest owner in the NBA with a net worth of about \$130 billion, according to *Forbes*, but even all his money can't help buy players because the second apron of the luxury tax is so punitive when it comes to building a team. The penalties are severe for teams that spend well above that threshold, and that hurt the Clippers when they tried to re-sign Paul George. "Guys like me have been very willing to pay the luxury tax," Ballmer says. "It's not about the luxury tax anymore. It's about the penalties in terms of how you get better. I'm not willing to sacrifice getting better. [I'm] still willing to pay the money, but it's more than money now."

Fantasy darling When he plays, Kawhi Leonard puts up numbers that no one else can match. He shot 52.5 percent from the field, 41.7 percent from 3-point range and 88.5 percent from the free-throw line in 2023-24. He'll probably match those figures again this season.

New digs The Clippers' new \$2 billion Intuit Dome arguably will be the best arena for watching basketball games and concerts. The Halo Board is a video board that boasts the largest-ever double-sided 4K display in an arena, with 38,375 square feet of digital space.



Last summer, Leonard had a “clean-up” procedure on his right knee after suffering a torn meniscus during the playoffs against the Phoenix Suns. He missed the entire 2021-22 season after having surgery to repair a partially torn right ACL. Over the course of five years with the Clippers, Leonard has played in just 229 out of a possible 410 regular-season games.

But when Leonard is healthy and he plays, he’s one of the best players in the league, as evidenced by his averages of 23.7 points, 6.1 rebounds and 3.6 assists per game last season. Leonard does his best work in the mid-post area, using his strength and footwork to get off any shots he wants at either elbow.

Derrick Jones Jr. is known for his defense and has become a somewhat reliable 3-point shooter. He was signed as a free agent from Dallas after the Clippers lost George in free agency. Jones is athletic and has a lot of bounce; he’ll be a player who will get out on the wing and can catch lob passes for dunks. His 3-point shooting has improved every year, topping out at 34.3 percent last season in Dallas. With the Clippers, Jones will be asked to defend the top wing players and to do his damage on the fast break.

In the low post, Ivica Zubac has improved every season over his eight years in the NBA, and the Clippers will need the 7-footer to take another step this season. Zubac has shown he is capable of doing that, with his best offense coming in the pick-and-roll with Harden. Zubac is mobile enough to score down low with either hand, and he isn’t afraid to bang. He’s not a great rim protector, but he uses his length and is really good at staying vertical either to block shots or make it difficult for opponents to score in the paint.

Do-everything forward Nicolas Batum returns to the Clippers after playing with the 76ers last season. Batum, 35, can play multiple positions and be a secondary ball-handler if needed.

Center Mo Bamba has talent and will tease at times with his skills, but he needs to show more effort.

BACKCOURT

The Clippers believe Harden will be much more aggressive on offense this season after he posted his lowest scoring average (16.6) since his second season

1.19

The Clippers ranked in the bottom half of the NBA in pace per game last season at 1.19.

The Clippers probably will be a slow-paced team again because Kawhi Leonard is a deliberate scorer, and James Harden likes to dribble a lot before shooting his step-back or step-side 3-point-er or passing.



OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICK

2. Cam Christie
SG, 6-6, 190, Minnesota
Christie, the younger brother of Lakers guard Max Christie, was solid for the Clippers during the Las Vegas Summer League, averaging 11.4 points over five games on 37.3 percent shooting and 40.5 percent on 3-pointers. He will spend most of his time with the San Diego Clippers, the Clippers’ G-League team.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

The Clippers’ key additions of Derrick Jones Jr., Nicolas Batum, Kevin Porter Jr., Kris Dunn and Mo Bamba give the team depth and some scoring and defense. Clippers head coach Tyronn Lue likes to play small ball at times, and he has a group of players who can thrive in that arrangement.

ROSTER																48-MINUTE					
HEAD COACH: TYRONN LUE (5TH SEASON; CAREER: 312-217)																2023-24 STATISTICS			PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS		
2	Kawhi Leonard	F	6-7	225	6/29/91	San Diego State	12	68	34.3	.525	.417	.885	6.1	3.6	23.7		8.6	5.0	33.2		
1	James Harden	G	6-5	220	8/26/89	Arizona State	15	72	34.3	.428	.381	.878	5.1	8.5	16.6		7.2	11.9	23.2		
24	Norman Powell	G	6-4	215	5/25/93	UCLA	9	76	26.2	.486	.435	.831	2.6	1.1	13.9		4.7	2.0	25.5		
40	Ivica Zubac	C	7-0	240	3/18/97	Mega Basket	8	68	26.4	.649	.000	.723	9.2	1.4	11.7		16.7	2.5	21.2		
14	Terance Mann	G/F	6-5	215	10/18/96	Florida State	5	75	25.0	.515	.348	.832	3.4	1.6	8.8		6.5	3.0	16.9		
55	Derrick Jones Jr.	F	6-6	210	2/15/97	UNLV	8	76	23.5	.483	.343	.713	3.3	1.0	8.6		6.7	2.0	17.7		
5	Bones Hyland	G	6-2	169	9/14/00	VCU	3	37	14.6	.386	.326	.783	1.5	2.5	6.9		4.9	8.3	22.7		
7	Amir Coffey	G/F	6-7	210	6/17/97	Minnesota	5	70	20.9	.472	.380	.859	2.1	1.1	6.6		4.9	2.5	15.2		
11	Kris Dunn	G	6-3	205	3/18/94	Providence	8	66	18.9	.470	.369	.688	2.9	3.8	5.4		7.3	9.8	13.7		
33	Nicolas Batum	G/F	6-8	230	12/14/88	Le Mans	16	60	25.5	.453	.395	.714	4.1	2.1	5.3		7.8	4.0	10.0		
4	Mo Bamba	C	7-0	231	5/12/98	Texas	6	57	13.0	.490	.391	.680	4.2	0.7	4.4		15.4	2.7	16.4		
21	Kobe Brown	F	6-7	250	1/01/00	Missouri	1	44	9.0	.411	.292	.500	1.4	0.6	2.0		7.6	3.0	10.8		
17	P.J. Tucker	F	6-5	245	5/05/85	Texas	13	31	15.7	.360	.371	1.000	2.7	0.5	1.7		8.4	1.6	5.1		
11	Jordan Miller	G	6-5	194	1/23/00	Miami	1	8	3.5	.556	.500	1.000	0.6	0.0	1.6		8.5	0.0	22.1		
77	Kevin Porter Jr.	G/F	6-4	203	5/04/00	USC	4	Did Not Play In NBA													
12	Cam Christie	G	6-6	190	7/24/05	Minnesota	R — First NBA Season														
	Trentyn Flowers	F	6-9	185	3/08/05	Adelaide	R — First NBA Season														



JAMES HARDEN

in the NBA (12.2 in 2010-11). Harden remains a lethal 3-point shooter, and his step-back jumper is dangerous. He is still an adept passer; his 8.5 assists per game last season ranked fourth in the NBA. He'll have to be the Clippers' second offensive option, and his output will need to approach 20 points per game for the Clippers to have success. Surprisingly to many of the coaches, Harden was a pretty good defender, using his girth and quick hands to get deflections.

At 6-foot-5, Terance Mann does a little bit of everything for the Clippers. He can defend multiple positions, run the offense, shoot the 3, pass the rock and simply play his role the right way. He doesn't have an ego and will do whatever it takes for the Clippers to win games.

Norman Powell was one of the NBA's top sixth men and ranked fifth in the league in 3-point shooting (43.5 percent). He'll be counted on to provide even more of a spark off the bench with Russell Westbrook having been traded.

Guard Kevin Porter Jr. is a talent, but he comes with some baggage. He averaged 19.2 points per game with the Rockets during the 2022-23 season, but he played in Greece last season after the Thunder, which acquired him from Houston, waived him. Porter was arrested in New York in September 2023 for allegedly assaulting a female companion. He subsequently pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges of harassment and reckless assault, and he may face a suspension from the league

FINAL ANALYSIS

In truth, with the Clippers losing George and his 22.6 points, 5.2 rebounds and 3.5 assists per game along with his 47.1 percent field-goal shooting (41.3 from 3-point range), Los Angeles is looking at fighting for a play-in position. The Western Conference is just too deep and balanced, and the Clippers aren't as good as they were when Leonard and George first teamed up in 2019.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Phoenix	10:00
Oct. 26	at Denver	5:00
Oct. 27	at Golden State	8:30
Oct. 30	Portland	10:30
Oct. 31	Phoenix	10:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Oklahoma City	10:30
Nov. 4	San Antonio	10:30
Nov. 6	Philadelphia	10:00
Nov. 8	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 9	Toronto	10:30
Nov. 11	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Nov. 13	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 15	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 17	Utah	9:00
Nov. 18	Golden State	10:30
Nov. 20	Orlando	10:30
Nov. 22	Sacramento	10:30
Nov. 24	at Philadelphia	6:00
Nov. 25	at Boston	7:30
Nov. 27	at Washington	7:00
Nov. 29	at Minnesota	7:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Denver	10:00
Dec. 3	Portland	10:30
Dec. 4	Minnesota	10:30
Dec. 8	Houston	9:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16: Emirates
NBA Cup Regular-Season Games

Dec. 19	at Dallas	8:30
Dec. 21	at Dallas	8:30
Dec. 23	at Memphis	8:00
Dec. 27	Golden State	10:00
Dec. 30	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 31	at San Antonio	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 4	Atlanta	10:30
Jan. 6	at Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 8	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 11	Charlotte	10:30
Jan. 13	Miami	10:30
Jan. 15	Brooklyn	10:30
Jan. 16	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 19	L.A. Lakers	9:00
Jan. 21	Chicago	10:30
Jan. 22	Boston	10:30
Jan. 25	Milwaukee	10:30
Jan. 27	at Phoenix	9:30
Jan. 29	at San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 31	at Charlotte	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at Toronto	3:30
Feb. 4	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Feb. 6	Indiana	10:30
Feb. 8	Utah	10:30
Feb. 12	Memphis	10:30
Feb. 20	at Milwaukee	8:00

Feb. 23	at Indiana	5:00
Feb. 24	at Detroit	7:00
Feb. 26	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 28	at L.A. Lakers	10:00

MARCH

March 2	at L.A. Lakers	9:30
March 4	at Phoenix	10:00
March 5	Detroit	10:30
March 7	New York	10:30
March 9	Sacramento	9:30
March 11	at New Orleans	9:30
March 12	at Miami	8:00
March 14	at Atlanta	7:30
March 16	Washington	10:00
March 18	Cleveland	10:30
March 19	at Utah	9:00
March 21	Memphis	10:30
March 23	Oklahoma City	9:00
March 26	at New York	7:30
March 28	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 30	at Cleveland	3:30
March 31	at Orlando	7:00

APRIL

April 2	New Orleans	10:00
April 4	Dallas	10:30
April 5	Dallas	10:30
April 8	San Antonio	10:30
April 9	Houston	10:30
April 11	at Sacramento	10:00
April 13	at Golden State	3:30

All times Eastern



LA LAKERS

Essentially, these are the same Los Angeles Lakers that were bounced out of the first round of the Western Conference playoffs by the Denver Nuggets.

The only significant new addition for the Lakers heading into the 2024-25 season is rookie head coach JJ Redick, who replaced the fired Darvin Ham. Redick has never coached in the NBA even in an assistant role, so his hiring for this historic franchise is no small thing.

But he has two of the best players in the NBA in LeBron James and Anthony Davis. And like they have since joining forces in 2019, James and Davis know they must continue to perform at a high level for the Lakers to succeed.

The Lakers didn't sign any free agents over the summer, nor did they make any trades. They drafted the player who is likely the most talked-about second-round pick in NBA history in USC guard Bronny James, LeBron's elder son. They used their first-round pick on Tennessee guard Dalton Knecht. But no one is counting on these two rookies to play key roles.

So, on paper, the central characters remain the same for the Lakers. But according to Davis, their mentality is different, and if they can keep their top contributors healthy, that tells him these Lakers are a different squad.

"Last year is last year," Davis says. "We can't say, 'Oh, this is the same team.' It could be a different result. For us, it's about coming in with that mindset of getting to work and seeing how it plays out."

FRONTCOURT

LeBron James remained one of the NBA's top players last season, playing in 71 games, the most since he joined the Lakers in 2018. He ranked 13th in the NBA in scoring (25.7 ppg) last season and was fifth in assists (8.3), and he also hauled in 7.3 rebounds per contest. He was even better in the playoffs, averaging 27.8 points, 8.8 assists and 6.8 rebounds while shooting 56.6 percent from the field and 38.5 percent from 3-point range, and he played well yet again for Team USA in the Paris Olympics.

James has been at his best with the ball in his hands throughout his entire career. He's a willing passer and sees



LEBRON JAMES

SCOUTING THE LAKERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I'm not sure what the plan is here other than keeping LeBron James happy. ... I think the worst thing to happen to this franchise is they figured out, and maybe accepted, that they can be average and still make money. ... LeBron is still very good, but he's not putting a team on his back anymore. And he's not suddenly going to get better. ... If Anthony Davis stays on the court, he's still magnificent, one of the two or three best bigs in the league. But if LeBron isn't playing, they look a lot like Davis' old Pelicans teams. ... Despite the media's fascination, they aren't scaring anyone."

FIVE-YEAR
WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 52-19
DIVISION: 1ST

2020-21
Record: 42-30
DIVISION: 3RD

2021-22
Record: 33-49
DIVISION: 4TH

2022-23
Record: 43-39
DIVISION: 5TH

2023-24
Record: 47-35
DIVISION: 3RD



ANTHONY DAVIS



BEYOND THE ARC

Keep firing Even in Year 21 of his illustrious career, LeBron James found a way to elevate his game. He shot a career-best 41 percent from 3-point range last season. Knowing that, Lakers head coach JJ Redick has a plan in place for James this season. “He and I joked about this,” Redick says. “He shot over 40 percent from 3 this year. I want him shooting 3s.”

Making history The basketball world will be speculating on when James and son Bronny James will play in their first regular-season game together. They will make NBA history as the first father-son duo to share an NBA court.

Nothing but net The Lakers were an excellent shooting team last season, and with an offensive-minded coach like Redick, they should be just as good this season. They were tied for second in the NBA in field-goal percentage, making 49.9 percent of their shots.

Bronny feels the heat Bronny James knows he carries a burden as LeBron’s son. “For sure, it’s an amplified amount of pressure,” Bronny says. “I’ve already seen it on social media and stuff, and the Internet and stuff and talking about that I might not deserve an opportunity. But I’ve been dealing with stuff like this my whole life. So it’s nothing different. But it’s more amplified, for sure. But I’ll get through it.”



the floor extremely well. But Redick says he'd like to see James be less ball-dominant and move more without the rock in his hands.

It'll be interesting to see how it plays out, if only because James has been great at doing things his way for 21 professional seasons. Not only is James the NBA's all-time leading scorer with 40,474 points, but his 11,009 assists rank fourth all time.

Either way, James has the basketball IQ to adjust his game, and he'll have the basketball more than enough. The Lakers will be counting on him.

Rui Hachimura didn't quite have the jump last season that was expected after he was so good during the 2023 playoffs. He dealt with nose and calf injuries last season and never seemed to find his way. But he is a skilled athlete, and the Lakers need him to play at an optimum level. He can shoot the 3-pointer or post up, and he cuts well without the basketball. But he has to improve his defense and probably will with better concentration. He needs to be a more effective rebounder, too.

Davis remains one of the best two-way talents in the NBA, and that's what the Lakers will need him to be. He may have a new role this season, as Redick has told Davis that he wants him to be at the center of the offense. Davis is skilled enough to do that because he can score from all over the court, has great vision to make the right pass and can handle the basketball.

Staying healthy and being available is the most important thing for Davis. He played in 76 games last season, the most of his 12-year career, and he must be on the court for the Lakers again.

"(Redick) talked about me being the hub of the offense," Davis says. "That will be different. We won't know everything until camp when we're able to get on the floor. We want LeBron to shoot more 3s. (Redick) wants to play fast and defend. From what he was telling me, I'm in total agreement with what he has planned for us. The goal at the end of the day is still to win a championship. You can't skip steps."

Jaxson Hayes and Christian Wood will be the backup centers, playing mostly against favorable matchups. Forward Jarred Vanderbilt is an elite defender and a hustle player. But he has to be healthy for the Lakers to utilize his talents, as he missed 53 games last season with a left heel injury.



OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1. Dalton Knecht
SG, 6-6, 213, Tennessee.
2. Bronny James
SG, 6-2, 210, USC

At 23, Knecht probably is more NBA-ready than James. If Knecht can knock down shots, he'll be given a chance to get some playing time. But he'll most likely spend most of the season with the G-League affiliate South Bay Lakers. He's not a great athlete, but he's smart and has a solid offensive game. James, 19, is in the developmental stage of his career. He'll probably play in a few games with the Lakers and his dad, LeBron, but Bronny can improve more quickly with the South Bay Lakers. He's a good athlete, but he needs to work on his ball-handling skills and outside shot.

ROSTER																	2023-24 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: JJ REDICK (1st SEASON; CAREER: 0-0)																													
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS										
23	LeBron James	F	6-9	250	12/30/84	St. Vincent-St. Mary (OH) HS	21	71	35.3	.540	.410	.750	7.3	8.3	25.7		9.9	11.3	34.9										
3	Anthony Davis	F/C	6-10	253	3/11/93	Kentucky	12	76	35.5	.556	.271	.816	12.6	3.5	24.7		17.1	4.7	33.3										
1	D'Angelo Russell	G	6-3	193	2/23/96	Ohio State	9	76	32.7	.456	.415	.828	3.1	6.3	18.0		4.6	9.3	26.5										
15	Austin Reaves	G	6-5	197	5/29/98	Oklahoma	3	82	32.1	.486	.367	.853	4.3	5.5	15.9		6.4	8.2	23.7										
28	Rui Hachimura	F	6-8	230	2/08/98	Gonzaga	5	68	26.8	.537	.422	.739	4.3	1.2	13.6		7.7	2.1	24.3										
35	Christian Wood	F	6-8	214	9/27/95	UNLV	8	50	17.4	.466	.307	.702	5.1	1.0	6.9		14.0	2.7	19.1										
5	Cam Reddish	F/G	6-7	217	9/01/99	Duke	5	48	20.5	.389	.336	.759	2.1	1.0	5.4		4.8	2.3	12.7										
2	Jarred Vanderbilt	F	6-8	214	4/03/99	Kentucky	6	29	20.0	.518	.296	.667	4.8	1.2	5.2		11.4	3.0	12.4										
11	Jaxson Hayes	C/F	7-0	220	5/23/00	Texas	5	70	12.5	.720	.000	.622	3.0	0.5	4.3		11.5	1.8	16.6										
10	Max Christie	G	6-5	190	2/10/03	Michigan State	2	67	14.1	.427	.356	.783	2.1	0.9	4.2		7.2	3.0	14.4										
7	Gabe Vincent	G	6-2	200	6/14/96	UC Santa Barbara	5	11	19.8	.306	.107	.500	0.8	1.9	3.1		2.0	4.6	7.5										
0	Jalen Hood-Schifino	G	6-5	215	6/19/03	Indiana	1	21	5.2	.222	.133	.600	0.6	0.4	1.6		5.7	3.5	15.0										
14	Colin Castleton	C	6-10	250	5/25/00	Florida	1	16	3.7	.563	.000	1.000	0.8	0.2	1.5		9.7	2.4	19.5										
21	Maxwell Lewis	F	6-7	195	7/27/02	Pepperdine	1	34	3.0	.190	.111	.667	0.1	0.2	0.3		1.9	2.8	5.1										
	Blake Hinson	F	6-8	230	12/26/99	Pittsburgh		R — First NBA Season																					
9	Bronny James	G	6-2	210	10/06/04	USC		R — First NBA Season																					
4	Dalton Knecht	F	6-6	215	4/19/01	Tennessee		R — First NBA Season																					
	Armel Traore	F	6-8	215	1/23/03	ADA Blois		R — First NBA Season																					



D'ANGELO RUSSELL

BACKCOURT

When D'Angelo Russell opted into his contract for \$18.7 million, the thought was that the Lakers would then trade him. But the polarizing point guard remains on the team. He's an effective 3-point shooter who can pass the ball. But his defense is basically nonexistent, he doesn't rebound well and he doesn't hustle enough. Russell has admitted he's not a great athlete, but that shouldn't stop him from playing hard all the time.

Austin Reaves has worked so hard over his three years that he's become the Lakers' third-best all-around player. And he's durable, being the only Laker to have played in all 82 regular-season games last season. If Reaves takes another step forward, it'll be beneficial to the Lakers' fortunes. He already shoots the 3-pointer well, and he's a good passer. He works hard on defense and isn't afraid to take charges.

The Lakers gave Max Christie a four-year, \$32-million extension as a show of confidence in his abilities. He should be a solid rotation player because he can shoot the ball and has a high basketball IQ.

Backup point guard Gabe Vincent came from the Heat and knows how to play the game the right way, but he missed 71 games last season with a knee injury. The Lakers need his all-around skills off the bench.

Rookies Bronny James and Dalton Knecht will play mostly for the South Bay Lakers, the Lakers' G League team.

FINAL ANALYSIS

It will be challenging, but if the Lakers stay healthy, they could be good enough to sneak into the playoffs in the super-competitive Western Conference because of the dynamic duo of LeBron James and Davis. But expecting James to shoulder such a heavy load at 40 is a tall ask.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Minnesota	10:00
Oct. 25	Phoenix	10:00
Oct. 26	Sacramento	10:30
Oct. 28	at Phoenix	10:00
Oct. 30	at Cleveland	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Toronto	7:30
Nov. 4	at Detroit	7:30
Nov. 6	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 8	Philadelphia	10:00
Nov. 13	Memphis	10:00
Nov. 15	at San Antonio	7:30
Nov. 16	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 19	Utah	10:30
Nov. 21	Orlando	10:30
Nov. 23	Denver	10:30
Nov. 26	at Phoenix	10:00
Nov. 27	at San Antonio	8:30
Nov. 29	Oklahoma City	10:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Utah	8:00
Dec. 2	at Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 4	at Miami	7:30
Dec. 6	at Atlanta	7:30
Dec. 8	Portland	9:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	at Sacramento	10:00

Dec. 21	at Sacramento	6:00
Dec. 23	Detroit	10:30
Dec. 25	at Golden State	8:00
Dec. 28	Sacramento	6:00
Dec. 31	Cleveland	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Portland	10:30
Jan. 3	Atlanta	10:30
Jan. 5	at Houston	7:00
Jan. 7	at Dallas	7:30
Jan. 9	Charlotte	10:30
Jan. 11	San Antonio	10:30
Jan. 13	San Antonio	10:30
Jan. 15	Miami	10:00
Jan. 17	Brooklyn	10:30
Jan. 19	at L.A. Clippers	9:00
Jan. 21	Washington	10:30
Jan. 23	Boston	10:00
Jan. 25	at Golden State	8:30
Jan. 27	at Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 28	at Philadelphia	7:30
Jan. 30	at Washington	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at New York	8:30
Feb. 4	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
Feb. 6	Golden State	10:00
Feb. 8	Indiana	4:00
Feb. 11	Utah	10:30
Feb. 12	at Utah	9:00
Feb. 20	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 22	at Denver	8:30

Feb. 25	Dallas	10:00
Feb. 27	Minnesota	10:30
Feb. 28	L.A. Clippers	10:00

MARCH

March 2	L.A. Clippers	9:30
March 4	New Orleans	10:30
March 6	New York	10:00
March 8	at Boston	8:30
March 10	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 13	at Milwaukee	7:30
March 14	at Denver	9:30
March 16	Phoenix	3:30
March 18	Milwaukee	10:30
March 19	Denver	10:00
March 22	Chicago	10:30
March 24	at Orlando	7:00
March 26	at Indiana	7:30
March 27	at Chicago	8:00
March 29	at Memphis	8:00
March 31	Houston	10:30

APRIL

April 3	Golden State	10:00
April 4	New Orleans	10:30
April 6	at Oklahoma City	3:30
April 8	at Oklahoma City	8:00
April 9	at Dallas	7:30
April 11	Houston	10:30
April 13	at Portland	3:30

All times Eastern



PHX SUNS

After two consecutive early playoff exits and two coach firings, the Phoenix Suns expect immediate results. Despite overlapping injuries last season among their three stars, the Suns expect Kevin Durant, Devin Booker and Bradley Beal to be healthy for the 2024-25 campaign.

Despite Frank Vogel's championship pedigree and defensive credentials making little difference in his only year as Phoenix's head coach, the Suns expect new coach Mike Budenholzer's championship résumé and offensive expertise to keep the team's title hopes alive.

Despite having a top-heavy roster that lacks defensive punch, the Suns believe they upgraded enough on the margins to improve their point guard depth.

Is that enough for the Suns to compete for an NBA title four years after challenging Budenholzer's Milwaukee Bucks in the Finals? The Suns think so, but they are banking on a few investments to yield hefty returns.

They believe Durant, Booker and Beal will have more time together to establish chemistry. They project that Budenholzer can manage both his stars and role players with similar success to what he accomplished in Milwaukee — an NBA title and five consecutive playoff appearances. And they sense they will have enough depth to complement their Big Three with point guard help (Tyus Jones, Monte Morris), wing support (Royce O'Neale) and some frontcourt pieces (Jusuf Nurkić, Mason Plumlee).

FRONT COURT

Durant enters his 17th NBA season showing more signs of sustained excellence than red flags about durability. Durant averaged 27.1 points while shooting 52.3 percent from the field and 41.3 percent from 3-point range along with 6.6 rebounds and 5.0 assists per game last season, numbers that are similar to his career averages.

The Suns should not worry about whether that can continue. Even though Durant lacks the same explosiveness he boasted before tearing his right Achilles tendon in the 2019 NBA Finals, he has compensated well enough with his superior length, footwork and shooting stroke to remain a scoring threat at the rim, in the post and from deep.



KEVIN DURANT

SCOUTING THE SUNS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Picking up Tyus Jones [Washington, free agency] may be a move that puts them over the top. ... All last season, we saw that this team was screaming for a point guard and true distributor. Jones is sort of a poor man's Mike Conley in that sense. He will set people up and never complain. ... Not sure what Frank Vogel did wrong to get fired after just one season. But Mike Budenholzer was an outstanding hire. He could make this work. ... It's now or never for Kevin Durant. He's running out of chances to show he can lead a team back to the Finals when he's not playing next to two or three other surefire Hall of Famers."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 34-39
DIVISION: 3RD

2020-21
Record: 51-21
DIVISION: 1ST

2021-22
Record: 64-18
DIVISION: 1ST

2022-23
Record: 45-37
DIVISION: 2ND

2023-24
Record: 49-33
DIVISION: 2ND

FROM LEFT: JESSE JOHNSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; JOE CAMPOREALE-USA TODAY SPORTS



DEVIN BOOKER



BEYOND THE ARC

Up in the air Majority owner Mat Ishbia has said that neither the Suns nor Kevin Durant want to break up. That does not guarantee that Durant will sign another extension, though. He remains under contract through the 2025-26 season, but Durant has been eligible since July 12 to sign a one-year, \$59.7 million deal to stay through 2026-27. Durant has until Oct. 21 to sign that deal.

Steep climb Durant needs 2,496 points to eclipse Wilt Chamberlain for seventh on the NBA's all-time scoring list. Durant has topped the 2K mark in seven seasons, including in 2023-24. But he has scored more than 2,500 points in a single season only once in his career (2,593 in 2013-14 with Oklahoma City).

Tax season The Suns are the first NBA team to spend at least \$400 million in combined payroll (\$223 million) and luxury taxes (\$198 million). How much patience will Ishbia have before expecting a return on investment?

Childhood dream After spending his childhood in Holbrook, Arizona, as a Suns fan, new head coach Mike Budenholzer appeared emotional over his new gig. "I would coach this team if it was on the moon," Budenholzer said at his introductory press conference. "I would coach this team if it was in Alaska, if these players were in Denmark and these owners and front office. I would go anywhere to coach this team."



The only problem? We’ve learned in the past two seasons that Durant’s on-court excellence does not guarantee team success. That’s mostly because the Suns don’t have enough defensive depth around Durant.

Nurkić has helped Durant and the Suns tremendously with his screen-setting and passing. He’s content scoring just off putbacks or other easy baskets when teammates face double-teams. But Nurkić remains a defensive liability.

It’s easy to say Durant can help offset that. He has great length and can defend at an elite level when he tries. At this stage of Durant’s career, however, the Suns need to preserve him for his scoring efficiency.

That’s why it was important that the Suns parted ways with a subpar backup center (Drew Eubanks) in favor of a more physical big who excels as both a team and individual defender (Plumlee). Also, O’Neale has become a decent wing option on both ends of the floor. This does not mean the Suns will become an elite defensive team. They may not be as disastrous, though.

BACKCOURT

As he’s shown with his Team USA stints, Booker can be more than just an aggressive scorer. He has improved as a playmaker and has gladly deferred to his star teammates when they’re open. He also can defend at a high level, too. Booker needs help, though.

That starts with Beal, who played in only 53 games last season amid various injuries. When available, Beal has co-existed well with other ball-dominant guards (such as John Wall and Russell Westbrook in Washington). It would be foolish, though, to bank on Beal becoming consistently healthy. He hasn’t played more than 60 regular-season games in a single season in the past five years. That’s why it’s critical that the Suns landed Jones on a veteran’s minimum contract. Jones has cemented himself as a reliable point guard because of his assist-to-turnover ratio (his 7.35 ratio in Washington last season is the best single-season mark in NBA history).

The Suns didn’t just acquire a quality backup for reinforcements. Jones should actually start over Beal because he will be more consistently available, and he

41
That’s the number of games that Kevin Durant, Devin Booker and Bradley Beal played together last season amid overlapping injuries. The Suns’ NBA title fortunes mainly hinge on whether they can drastically improve that number.



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Picks

1. Ryan Dunn
SF, 6-8, 216, Virginia

2. Oso Ighodaro
C, 6-11, 235, Marquette

The Suns entered the draft with only the No. 22 overall pick, but they made draft-day trades to secure a strong wing defender (Dunn) in the first round and a shooting big (Ighodaro) in the second.

Other Newcomers

Despite having minimal cap space, Phoenix addressed its backcourt issues by landing **Tyus Jones** and **Monte Morris** on veteran minimum deals. Phoenix also upgraded at backup center (Mason Plumlee over Drew Eubanks).

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY								
HEAD COACH: MIKE BUDENHOLZER (1ST SEASON; CAREER: 484-317)																	2023-24 STATISTICS								
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS						
35	Kevin Durant	F	6-11	240	9/29/88	Texas	16	75	37.2	.523	.413	.856	6.6	5.0	27.1		8.5	6.5	35.0						
1	Devin Booker	G	6-6	206	10/30/96	Kentucky	9	68	36.0	.492	.364	.886	4.5	6.9	27.1		6.0	9.3	36.1						
3	Bradley Beal	G	6-4	207	6/28/93	Florida	12	53	33.3	.513	.430	.813	4.4	5.0	18.2		6.3	7.2	26.2						
8	Grayson Allen	G	6-4	198	10/08/95	Duke	6	75	33.5	.499	.461	.878	3.9	3.0	13.5		5.6	4.3	19.4						
5	Tyus Jones	G	6-1	196	5/10/96	Duke	9	66	29.3	.489	.414	.800	2.7	7.3	12.0		4.4	12.0	19.6						
20	Jusuf Nurkić	C	7-0	290	8/23/94	Cedevita	10	76	27.3	.510	.244	.640	11.0	4.0	10.9		19.3	7.0	19.1						
00	Royce O’Neale	F	6-6	226	6/05/93	Baylor	7	79	24.7	.397	.370	.686	4.8	2.8	7.7		9.3	5.4	14.9						
44	Mason Plumlee	F/C	6-10	254	3/05/90	Duke	11	46	14.7	.569	.000	.707	5.1	1.2	5.3		16.7	3.9	17.4						
11	Bol Bol	C/F	7-3	220	11/16/99	Oregon	5	43	10.9	.616	.423	.789	3.2	0.4	5.2		14.0	1.7	22.8						
23	Monte Morris	G	6-2	183	6/27/95	Iowa State	7	33	14.4	.405	.386	.684	1.7	2.1	5.0		5.7	7.0	16.5						
2	Josh Okogie	G	6-4	213	9/01/98	Georgia Tech	6	60	16.0	.417	.309	.745	2.6	1.1	4.6		7.7	3.2	13.9						
21	Collin Gillespie	G	6-1	195	6/25/99	Villanova	1	24	9.4	.464	.395	.667	0.9	1.1	3.6		4.5	5.8	18.5						
25	Nassir Little	F/G	6-6	220	2/11/00	North Carolina	5	45	10.2	.460	.300	.850	1.7	0.5	3.4		7.9	2.2	15.9						
23	TyTy Washington Jr.	G	6-3	195	11/15/01	Kentucky	2	11	5.1	.300	.333	.000	0.5	0.5	1.3		4.3	4.3	12.0						
32	E.J. Liddell	F	6-6	240	12/18/00	Ohio State	1	8	2.9	.167	.000	1.000	0.6	0.1	0.5		10.4	2.1	8.3						
10	Damion Lee	G/F	6-6	210	10/21/92	Drexel	6	Injured — Missed Season																	
	Jalen Bridges	F	6-8	225	5/14/01	Baylor		R — First NBA Season																	
0	Ryan Dunn	F	6-8	216	1/07/03	Virginia		R — First NBA Season																	
4	Oso Ighodaro	F	6-11	235	7/14/02	Marquette		R — First NBA Season																	



BRADLEY BEAL

possesses better traditional point guard skills. That move will establish continuity regardless of whether Beal stays healthy. Meanwhile, Beal can give the Suns’ second unit additional scoring punch without worrying about taking away touches from Durant and Booker.

Durant, Booker and Beal experienced tactical adjustments with how they should manage their playmaking duties. That won’t be an issue with Jones, who will primarily organize the offense to ensure easy baskets for Durant and Booker. It’s an added plus that the Suns also have Morris, a backup point guard option who can fill in the gaps should Beal miss time.

The Suns will miss the secondary scoring of Eric Gordon, who left for Philadelphia on a veteran’s minimum deal. But Grayson Allen has blossomed as both an aggressive scorer and a more disciplined defender.

FINAL ANALYSIS

On paper, the Suns should be improved enough to avoid another first-round exit.

Their Big Three will have more on-court time together. Budenholzer will improve the team’s offense. The Suns have a relatively better supporting cast that can improve their playmaking and defense.

Still, the foundation hasn’t become completely sturdy yet. Beal has an extensive injury history, and the Suns can’t assume that will change. Their defensive potential seems limited. Although Phoenix has a respectable supporting cast, it doesn’t match the depth that Oklahoma City, Minnesota and Dallas possess. It seems unlikely that Phoenix can receive equal value in a potential Beal trade. But the Suns are likely better off dealing him before the trade deadline, both to trim salary and to enhance their depth.

The Suns’ fortunes mostly rest on whether Durant and Booker remain durable and efficient.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
Oct. 25	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Oct. 26	Dallas	10:00
Oct. 28	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Oct. 31	at L.A. Clippers	10:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Portland	10:00
Nov. 4	Philadelphia	10:15
Nov. 6	Miami	9:00
Nov. 8	at Dallas	7:30
Nov. 10	Sacramento	8:00
Nov. 12	at Utah	9:00
Nov. 13	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 15	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Nov. 17	at Minnesota	3:30
Nov. 18	Orlando	9:00
Nov. 20	New York	10:00
Nov. 26	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Nov. 27	Brooklyn	9:00
Nov. 30	Golden State	9:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 3	San Antonio	9:00
Dec. 5	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 7	at Miami	8:00
Dec. 8	at Orlando	6:30
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	
Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16:	Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games	
Dec. 19	Indiana	9:00

Dec. 21	Detroit	9:00
Dec. 23	at Denver	10:00
Dec. 25	Denver	10:30
Dec. 27	Dallas	9:00
Dec. 28	at Golden State	8:30
Dec. 31	Memphis	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 4	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 6	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 7	at Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 9	Atlanta	9:00
Jan. 11	Utah	5:00
Jan. 12	Charlotte	9:00
Jan. 14	at Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 16	at Washington	7:30
Jan. 18	at Detroit	5:00
Jan. 20	at Cleveland	3:30
Jan. 22	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 25	Washington	9:00
Jan. 27	L.A. Clippers	9:30
Jan. 29	Minnesota	9:00
Jan. 31	at Golden State	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 3	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 5	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 7	Utah	10:00
Feb. 8	Denver	9:00
Feb. 11	Memphis	10:00
Feb. 12	at Houston	8:30
Feb. 20	at San Antonio	9:30

Feb. 22	at Chicago	5:00
Feb. 23	at Toronto	6:00
Feb. 25	at Memphis	8:00
Feb. 27	New Orleans	10:00
Feb. 28	New Orleans	9:00

MARCH

March 2	Minnesota	9:30
March 4	L.A. Clippers	10:00
March 7	at Denver	10:00
March 9	at Dallas	3:30
March 10	at Memphis	8:00
March 12	at Houston	8:00
March 14	Sacramento	10:00
March 16	at L.A. Lakers	3:30
March 17	Toronto	10:00
March 19	Chicago	10:00
March 21	Cleveland	10:00
March 24	Milwaukee	10:00
March 26	Boston	10:00
March 28	at Minnesota	8:00
March 30	Houston	9:00

APRIL

April 1	at Milwaukee	8:00
April 4	at Boston	7:30
April 6	at New York	7:00
April 8	Golden State	10:00
April 9	Oklahoma City	10:00
April 11	San Antonio	10:00
April 13	at Sacramento	3:30

All times Eastern



SAC KINGS

In hopes of making a deeper playoff push, the Sacramento Kings achieved two key offseason goals. They declined to break up their core group — De'Aaron Fox, Domontas Sabonis, Keegan Murray and Malik Monk — while making a big free-agency move in acquiring DeMar DeRozan in a sign-and-trade with Chicago. And they granted head coach Mike Brown a three-year contract extension.

Will that enable the Kings to make a postseason run? It's hard to say, because the Kings compete in a crowded Western Conference.

Nonetheless, Sacramento believes that its approach will give it the best chance to compete amid salary-cap restrictions and small-market disadvantages. It may also ensure front office, coaching and roster stability after experiencing nearly two decades filled with frequent turnover in all three departments. The Kings look to the Denver Nuggets as validation for their philosophy; Denver won the 2023 NBA title after experiencing various learning curves and injuries in previous seasons.

FRONTCOURT

On paper, the Kings have one of the league's most dynamic frontcourts. Sabonis has become a versatile scorer as well as one of the league's best rebounders and passers. The Kings didn't include Murray in any trade discussions this offseason because he has morphed into a dependable all-around player as a versatile defender, scorer and passer. DeRozan is one of the league's most efficient mid-range shooters.

But how will they play together as a unit without diluting each other's individual strengths? That question likely will determine the Kings' ceiling. Don't worry about DeRozan's ongoing reluctance to shoot 3-pointers; Murray can take care of that role. Sabonis and DeRozan can also play off each other well, as both are post-up and pick-and-pop players. DeRozan isn't the best defender, but Murray can provide some flexibility because he can guard both wings and bigs. The Kings may try to acquire an additional backup big man before or during the season, but Trey Lyles appears to be a decent option at the backup power forward position.

No one doubts the Kings' offensive potential. Sabonis, DeRozan and Murray all have versatile games and boast



DE'AARON FOX

SCOUTING THE KINGS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"They've had the potential for great things the past two seasons thanks to De'Aaron Fox and Domantas Sabonis, as well as the coaching of Mike Brown. I just don't know if they're built for the playoffs. ... I'm not sure DeMar DeRozan changes that. He's an upgrade over Harrison Barnes in the scoring department, but I don't think scoring was the problem. ... Kevin Huert-er needs a bounce-back season. ... Malik Monk can score, Keegan Murray can score, but again, who is doing the dirty work here? ... I just don't know if they have the grit to get deep into the playoffs. Maybe, but I think that's the one big question mark."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2019-20
Record: 31-41
DIVISION: 4TH

2020-21
Record: 31-41
DIVISION: 5TH

2021-22
Record: 30-52
DIVISION: 5TH

2022-23
Record: 48-34
DIVISION: 1ST

2023-24
Record: 46-36
DIVISION: 4TH

FROM LEFT: BRAD PENNER-USA TODAY SPORTS; ED SZCZEPANSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS



DOMANTAS SABONIS



BEYOND THE ARC

Winning talks De'Aaron Fox, who has two years left on his contract, declined to sign an extension this offseason. *The Athletic* reported that Fox wants to see how the front office manages its roster and how the team plays. Fox also will be eligible for a larger max deal if he makes an All-NBA team this season. Fox has stayed devoted to Sacramento since it selected him fifth overall in the 2017 draft and prioritized him over Tyrese Haliburton two years ago. Nonetheless, Fox may feel differently if he senses that Sacramento's contention window has closed.

Mr. Clutch Expect DeMar DeRozan and Fox to compete head-to-head for the NBA's Clutch Player of the Year award. "I told him I was mad two years ago that he got it and I didn't get it," DeRozan told reporters. "We've definitely been battling." Both Fox and DeRozan like to take the last shot and have strong reputations as winning players.

Identity switch Last season's Kings went 25-31 against teams with winning records, but they went 15-8 against the Thunder, Nuggets, Timberwolves, Clippers, Mavericks and Lakers — all playoff participants. That captures the thin margin the Kings face in being either an average team or a playoff contender.



strong reputations as team-oriented players. But can they take a leap defensively? Brown preached all of last season about the need to play with more physicality and discipline. That way, Sacramento could become a better defensive team without falling into foul trouble. Yet, the Kings finished 17th out of 30 NBA teams in points allowed (114.8) and 24th in fouls per game (19.9).

Murray has what it takes to make an All-Defensive team. But the verdict is still out on DeRozan and Sabonis. DeRozan communicates and doesn't take plays off, but don't expect him to be a lockdown defender. Sabonis has stood up to other bigs who try to push him around, but he needs to show more consistency without becoming frustrated with either his opponent or the officials' whistle.

BACKCOURT

Just like in the past two seasons, the Kings will have one of the NBA's fastest backcourts.

Brown has said that Fox is the fastest point guard he has coached since Tony Parker. Monk will be in the running for Sixth Man of the Year again for how quickly he scores with the second unit. Kevin Huerter can thrive both when he goes downhill and when he launches from deep.

Fox's job will remain as the team's definitive point guard, a role he has filled since the Kings dealt Tyrese Haliburton to Indiana two years ago. Fox will be charged with organizing the offense, scoring in the open court and staying committed to the two-man game with Sabonis. With DeRozan in the mix, Fox will have even more options. Despite DeRozan's lack of 3-point prowess, the Kings actually will have more spacing for Fox to operate because defenders will have to account for another scoring option.

Nevertheless, Fox and DeRozan will have to figure out potential game-winning shots as a duo. Both have usually taken care of that role on their respective teams, but they also have proven to be willing passers who don't always command the spotlight. This dynamic won't cause much friction, but they may experience an early learning curve with how to handle crunch time from a tactical standpoint.

46

By the end of the 2024-25 season, Sacramento and Denver could become the lone Western Conference teams to post at least 46 regular-season wins in each of the past three seasons. But that might not be enough against other teams with more upside (Oklahoma City, Minnesota), star power (Dallas, Denver) or key players returning from injuries (Memphis).



OFFSEASON MOVES

Draft Pick

1. Devin Carter
SG, 6-3, 195, Providence
Carter has drawn comparisons to Derrick White of the Celtics for his two-way potential and great attitude.

Other Newcomers

Sacramento worked its way under the luxury tax and freed up a roster spot, which enabled them to make two significant moves: retaining Malik Monk and acquiring DeMar DeRozan. The acquisition of DeRozan came at the cost of a valued veteran (Harrison Barnes), a guard (Chris Duarte), two second-round picks and a first-round pick swap (2031). But the Kings expect to become an offensively dominant team with DeRozan in the mix.

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE					
HEAD COACH: NAME MIKE BROWN (3RD SEASON; CAREER: 441-286)																	2023-24 STATISTICS			PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS			
5	De'Aaron Fox	G	6-3	185	12/20/97	Kentucky	7	74	35.9	.465	.369	.738	4.6	5.6	26.6		6.1	7.5	35.5			
10	DeMar DeRozan	G/F	6-6	220	8/07/89	USC	15	79	37.8	.480	.333	.853	4.3	5.3	24.0		5.5	6.8	30.5			
11	Domantas Sabonis	F/C	6-10	240	5/03/96	Gonzaga	8	82	35.7	.594	.379	.704	13.7	8.2	19.4		18.4	11.0	26.1			
0	Malik Monk	G	6-3	200	2/04/98	Kentucky	7	72	26.0	.443	.350	.829	2.9	5.1	15.4		5.4	9.5	28.5			
13	Keegan Murray	F	6-8	225	8/19/00	Iowa	2	77	33.6	.454	.358	.831	5.5	1.7	15.2		7.8	2.4	21.7			
9	Kevin Huerter	G/F	6-7	198	8/27/98	Maryland	6	64	24.4	.443	.361	.766	3.5	2.6	10.2		6.9	5.1	20.1			
41	Trey Lyles	F	6-9	234	11/05/95	Kentucky	9	58	20.0	.445	.384	.700	4.4	1.2	7.2		10.7	3.0	17.4			
23	Keon Ellis	G	6-3	175	1/08/00	Alabama	2	57	17.2	.461	.417	.743	2.2	1.5	5.4		6.1	4.2	15.2			
6	Jordan McLaughlin	G	6-0	185	4/09/96	USC	5	56	11.2	.483	.472	.722	1.3	2.0	3.5		5.5	8.4	14.9			
2	Jalen McDaniels	F	6-9	190	1/31/98	San Diego State	5	50	10.8	.344	.169	.730	1.6	0.7	3.4		7.0	3.3	15.1			
	Orlando Robinson	C	6-10	235	7/10/00	Fresno State	2	36	8.4	.500	.533	.760	2.3	0.9	2.8		13.3	5.4	15.6			
25	Alex Len	C	7-0	250	6/16/93	Maryland	11	48	9.3	.617	.000	.588	2.7	1.0	2.5		13.8	5.4	13.0			
20	Colby Jones	G	6-6	207	5/28/02	Xavier	1	30	6.4	.394	.910	.545	1.3	0.7	2.1		10.0	5.0	16.0			
8	Mason Jones	G	6-4	200	7/21/98	Arkansas	3	5	5.5	.250	.286	.500	1.0	1.0	1.4		8.7	8.7	12.1			
	Devin Carter	G	6-3	195	3/18/02	Providence		R — First NBA Season														
	Isaiah Crawford	F	6-6	220	11/01/01	Louisiana Tech		R — First NBA Season														
	Isaac Jones	F	6-9	245	7/11/00	Washington State		R — First NBA Season														



MALIK MONK

For the fifth starter, Brown can choose among Monk, Huerter, Keon Ellis and first-round draft pick Devin Carter. Monk likely will remain a reserve because he excels in that role. Huerter, Ellis and Carter will share starting and reserve roles depending on matchups and recent performances. Huerter gives the Kings an additional 3-point shooter and floor spacer. Ellis proved solid with intangibles when he started 21 games last season amid overlapping injuries to Huerter and Monk. Carter won't receive a starting opportunity immediately because Brown is known to trust veterans, but he will eventually get his chance because of his defensive potential. Carter will make enough of an impact that Murray doesn't feel he has to handle every major defensive assignment.

FINAL ANALYSIS

After challenging the Warriors in a seven-game first-round series in the 2023 NBA playoffs, Brown argued his team could contend for a championship. He wasn't just offering coachspeak. The Kings have one of the league's most elite offenses, great team chemistry and depth. Considering his coaching credentials, Brown also expects the Kings to drastically improve their defense.

The only problem? Their internal improvement likely won't be enough to compensate for the increased parity in the Western Conference. Both Oklahoma City and Minnesota boast young teams equipped to become title contenders. Dallas and Denver have the right amount of star power to stay in that mix, too. The Grizzlies could enter the conversation with Ja Morant expected to be healthy. Other teams have generational stars. Where does this leave Sacramento? The Kings have enough continuity to make a playoff run and could take advantage of other teams' health or chemistry issues. But they very well could make a quick exit. An educated guess? Look for the Kings to lose in a competitive first-round series.

2024-25 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 24	Minnesota	10:00
Oct. 26	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Oct. 28	Portland	10:00
Oct. 29	at Utah	9:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Atlanta	7:30
Nov. 2	at Toronto	7:30
Nov. 4	at Miami	8:15
Nov. 6	Toronto	10:00
Nov. 8	L.A. Clippers	10:00
Nov. 10	at Phoenix	8:00
Nov. 11	at San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 13	Phoenix	10:00
Nov. 15	Minnesota	10:00
Nov. 16	Utah	10:00
Nov. 18	Atlanta	10:00
Nov. 22	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 24	Brooklyn	9:00
Nov. 25	Oklahoma City	10:00
Nov. 27	at Minnesota	8:00
Nov. 29	at Portland	10:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	San Antonio	9:00
Dec. 3	Houston	10:00
Dec. 5	at Memphis	8:00
Dec. 6	at San Antonio	8:00
Dec. 8	Utah	6:00
Dec. 10, 11, 14, 17:	Emirates NBA Cup Knockout Rounds	

Dec. 12, 13, 15, 16: Emirates NBA Cup Regular-Season Games		
Dec. 19	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Dec. 21	L.A. Lakers	6:00
Dec. 22	Indiana	6:00
Dec. 26	Detroit	10:00
Dec. 28	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Dec. 30	Dallas	10:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Philadelphia	10:00
Jan. 3	Memphis	10:00
Jan. 5	at Golden State	8:30
Jan. 6	Miami	10:00
Jan. 10	at Boston	7:30
Jan. 12	at Chicago	3:30
Jan. 14	at Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 16	Houston	10:00
Jan. 19	Washington	9:00
Jan. 22	Golden State	10:00
Jan. 23	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 25	at New York	7:30
Jan. 27	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 29	at Philadelphia	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 3	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 5	Orlando	10:00
Feb. 6	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 8	New Orleans	10:00
Feb. 10	at Dallas	8:30
Feb. 12	at New Orleans	8:00

Feb. 13	at New Orleans	8:00
Feb. 21	Golden State	10:00
Feb. 24	Charlotte	10:00
Feb. 26	at Utah	9:00

MARCH

March 1	at Houston	8:00
March 3	at Dallas	8:30
March 5	at Denver	9:00
March 7	San Antonio	10:00
March 9	at L.A. Clippers	9:30
March 10	New York	10:30
March 13	at Golden State	10:00
March 14	at Phoenix	10:00
March 17	Memphis	10:00
March 19	Cleveland	10:00
March 20	Chicago	10:00
March 22	Milwaukee	10:00
March 24	Boston	10:00
March 25	Oklahoma City	10:00
March 27	Portland	10:00
March 29	at Orlando	5:00
March 31	at Indiana	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at Washington	7:00
April 4	at Charlotte	7:00
April 6	at Cleveland	6:00
April 7	at Detroit	7:00
April 9	Denver	10:00
April 11	L.A. Clippers	10:00
April 13	Phoenix	3:30

All times Eastern

2024-25 NBA FANTASY PREVIEW



FANTASY BASKETBALL RANKINGS

BY SLOAN PIVA

Here's the Athlon Sports big board for the 2024-25 fantasy hoops season, with 144 players in the NBA universe ranked to accommodate 12-team, nine-category leagues with 12-man rosters.

Shoutout to FBI Basketball for providing us with early data on average draft positions, which helped gauge our understanding of how the fantasy public has been valuing certain players. Now, let's get to our rankings ...

1 NIKOLA JOKIĆ Don't pass on a three-time MVP and hyper-efficient triple-double machine on a championship-caliber team. Joker played 79 games last season! He stays at the top, at least for now.
C, NUGGETS

2 VICTOR WEMBANYAMA Wemby dominated just about every facet of the game late in his rookie year, and he'll be an MVP candidate before long. He feels like a lock to win the first of many Defensive Player of the Year trophies this season. If he stays healthy, the 20-year-old will lead countless fantasy teams to titles.
F/C, SPURS

3. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, G, Thunder The reigning MVP runner-up easily could lead the league in scoring, steals and free-throw percentage in 2024-25. He also shot better than former MVP Joel Embiid from the field last season, while averaging 2.2 turnovers compared to JoJo's 3.8. SGA is a no-brainer in the top four.

4. Luka Dončić, G, Mavericks Four seems right for Luka, who played 95 total games between the NBA regular season, playoffs, Finals and Olympic qualifiers. His scoring, passing and rebounding — combined with an ever-improving free-throw stroke — make him as appealing as ever. But concerns related to his defense, percentages, turnovers and durability prevent him from cracking the top three.

5. Jayson Tatum, F, Celtics Not even Tatum's worst detractors can argue with the fact that he has evolved into a fantasy monster. And his age (26) and durability ultimately contributed to him landing this top-five ranking above other big names. He remains an elite scorer, but big steps forward as a playmaker, rebounder and defender suggest JT's peak could still be on the horizon.

6. Tyrese Haliburton, G, Pacers Hali appeared on pace for fantasy MVP last season before being slowed by a January hamstring injury and Indy's deadline acquisition of Pascal Siakam. He's still one of the best passers in the NBA and a tremendously efficient scorer from all three levels. Oh, and he's only 24.



ISAIAH J. DOWNING-USA TODAY SPORTS

7. Anthony Davis, F/C, Lakers AD rewarded 2023 early-round investors handsomely, playing 76 games and finishing as the only player in the campaign with averages of at least 24 points, 12 rebounds, two blocks and a steal. You'll be breathing into a bag every time he falls to the floor or limps to the locker room, but Davis will be worth the bouts of anxiety if he can replicate that availability and output.



8. Giannis Antetokounmpo, F/C, Bucks It's always difficult to rank Giannis in 9-cat formats. He's so dominant and has such a high usage rate but can be such a disaster for categories like free-throw percentage and 3-pointers. In points leagues, he's a top-four pick. Top 10 in 9-cat seems fair for a guy who just averaged 30.4/11.5/6.5/1.2/1.1 but dealt with multiple injuries.

9. Joel Embiid, F/C, 76ers If Embiid fell any lower on this list, residents of the city of Philadelphia might track us down. But injury concerns have to enter into the equation when analyzing the 2023 MVP. Nobody's denying JoJo's

gargantuan usage rate (although that should dip considerably with Paul George in town) or his elite scoring, rebounding, free-throw shooting and rim protection. A vital ability is availability, and we can't possibly bank on that at any point in Embiid's ninth season.

10. Kevin Durant, F, Suns KD reminded the world at the Olympics that he remains one of the best overall players in the game. Don't let his 36-year-old body distract you from his production

(27.1/6.6/5.0/1.2 in '23-24) and efficiency (52/41/86 shooting splits).

11. Scottie Barnes, F, Raptors The core foundation of Toronto's rebuild, Barnes broke out in a big way last season. He averaged a tick under 20 points on shooting splits of 48/34/78, adding 8.2 rebounds, 6.1 assists, 1.5 blocks and 1.3 steals per game. Be sure to monitor his health at draft time (he broke his hand in March), but this dude's 23 and well worth a second-round pick.

12. Chet Holmgren, F/C, Thunder Overshadowed by extraterrestrial Wemby last season, Holmgren's redshirt rookie year was nonetheless brilliant. We don't care much about "What a Pro Wants," but we

know that this towering 7-foot-1 22-year-old provides plenty of what fantasy managers need: scoring, rebounding, rim protection and efficiency at all three shooting levels. Oh, and he played all 82 games last season; so much for the narrative around potential durability issues.

13. Domantas Sabonis, F/C, Kings Offensive production could decline slightly with DeMar DeRozan in town, but Sabonis remains an absolute beast with counting stats. Domas is not an ideal fit for builds focusing on percentages, defense or 3-pointers, but he's more than useful otherwise.

14. James Harden, G, Clippers Usage/production should both increase substantially without Paul George and Russell Westbrook around. Vintage Harden comeback season!?

15. Donovan Mitchell, G, Cavaliers Spida got paid, and the Cavs should in theory get healthy around him. As safe a second-round pick as they come.

16. Trae Young, G, Hawks Should benefit from the departure of Dejounte Murray and consequent arrival of Dyson Daniels. Trae can be Trae again.

17. Kyrie Irving, G, Mavericks Forever a risk, but Kyrie's head has been on his shoulders under new-age Zen master Jason Kidd. That's enough to warrant a second-round ranking — talent was never the problem.

18. Stephen Curry, G, Warriors Availability will always be the biggest question mark of Steph's abilities. But when he's healthy, he's still an assassin.

19. LaMelo Ball, G, Hornets Risks are obvious with any big Baller — but if he enjoys even a 75-percent healthy season, he yields first-round production.

20. Kawhi Leonard, F, Clippers Potential reward seems worth the injury and load-management risks. He missed only 14 regular-season games last season — fewer DNPs than a handful of early-round guys — and he averaged 23.7/6.1/3.6/1.6/0.9. Might enjoy his best season as a Clipper with PG13 in Philly.



21. Jalen Brunson, G, Knicks

Brunson fans will say “too low,” but remember that OG Anunoby, Julius Randle and Mikal Bridges all weren’t around when JB’s usage and fantasy value soared the highest last season. Expect some regression.

22. Devin Booker, G, Suns Pure scorer who lights it up with 3-pointers and percentages, Book will take a slight assists hit with Tyus Jones in town, but everything else will be fine.

23. Paolo Banchero, F, Magic Star continues to rise, albeit somewhat quietly. Very good at lots of things and not nearly as bad a free-throw shooter as naysayers might suggest.

24. Damian Lillard, G, Bucks Gone are the days when Dame goes in the top 10, but he yields plenty of value around the 2-3 turn. He’s still a marksman and a volume scorer when healthy.

25. Anthony Edwards, G/F, Timberwolves One of the emergent faces of the league, Ant-Man continues to get better. But those buying him as a first-round pick are fooling themselves.

26. Paul George, F, 76ers Many are down on PG13, but he should be plenty motivated in his new digs. He’s a steal anywhere in the third round.

27. Evan Mobley, F, Cavaliers The breakout is coming. He’s a fantastic defender who only began to scratch the surface as a scorer in the 2024 postseason. Sky’s the limit.

28. Jaren Jackson Jr., F/C, Grizzlies Nothing was working for Memphis last season. With Ja Morant back and Zach Edey allowing JJJ to be JJJ, expect a bounce-back campaign.

29. Bam Adebayo, F/C, Heat Always reliable, Bam stays in great shape and rarely lets his investors down with big-man stats.

30. Tyrese Maxey, G, 76ers PG13 hurts Maxey more than Maxey hurts PG. Both still easily warrant top-30 selections, though.

31. Alperen Şengün, F/C, Rockets
32. De’Aaron Fox, G, Kings
33. Cade Cunningham, G, Pistons
34. LeBron James, F, Lakers
35. Ja Morant, G, Grizzlies
36. Lauri Markkanen, F, Jazz
37. Jimmy Butler, G/F, Heat
38. Karl-Anthony Towns, F/C, Timberwolves
39. Desmond Bane, G/F, Grizzlies
40. Dejounte Murray, G, Pelicans
41. Fred VanVleet, G, Rockets
42. Jaylen Brown, G/F, Celtics
43. Jalen Williams, G/F, Thunder
44. Jamal Murray, G, Nuggets
45. Derrick White, G, Celtics
46. Jalen Johnson, F, Hawks
47. Franz Wagner, F, Magic
48. Myles Turner, C, Pacers
49. Pascal Siakam, F/C, Pacers
50. DeMar DeRozan, F, Kings
51. Jarrett Allen, C, Cavaliers
52. Jalen Duren, F/C, Pistons
53. Immanuel Quickley, G, Raptors
54. Zion Williamson, F, Pelicans
55. Rudy Gobert, C, Timberwolves
56. Kristaps Porziņģis, F/C, Celtics
57. Darius Garland, G, Cavaliers
58. Deandre Ayton, C, Trail Blazers
59. Nikola Vucevic, C, Bulls
60. Nic Claxton, F/C, Nets
61. Coby White, G, Bulls
62. Anfernee Simons, G, Trail Blazers
63. Mikal Bridges, G/F, Knicks
64. Brook Lopez, C, Bucks
65. Miles Bridges, F, Hornets
66. Jrue Holiday, G, Celtics
67. Brandon Ingram, F, Pelicans
68. Devin Vassell, G/F, Spurs
69. D’Angelo Russell, G, Lakers
70. Trey Murphy III, G/F, Pelicans
71. OG Anunoby, F, Knicks
72. Austin Reaves, G, Lakers
73. Brandon Miller, G/F, Hornets
74. Isaiah Hartenstein, F/C, Thunder
75. Kyle Kuzma, F, Wizards
76. Tyler Herro, G, Heat
77. Julius Randle, F, Knicks
78. Mark Williams, F/C, Hornets
79. Herbert Jones, F, Pelicans
80. Josh Giddey, G, Bulls
81. Tobias Harris, F, Pistons
82. Bradley Beal, G, Suns
83. Onyeka Okongwu, F/C, Hawks
84. CJ McCollum, G, Pelicans
85. Zach LaVine, G/F, Bulls
86. Michael Porter Jr., F, Nuggets
87. Terry Rozier, G, Heat

88. Jusuf Nurkić, C, Suns
89. Keegan Murray, F, Kings
90. RJ Barrett, F, Raptors
91. Dereck Lively II, C, Mavericks
92. Cam Thomas, G, Nets
93. Draymond Green, F/C, Warriors
94. Jabari Smith Jr., F/C, Rockets
95. Bogdan Bogdanović, G/F, Hawks
96. Jalen Green, G, Rockets
97. Jordan Poole, G, Wizards
98. Daniel Gafford, F/C, Mavericks
99. Khris Middleton, F, Bucks
100. Keyonte George, G, Jazz
101. Tyus Jones, G, Suns
102. Mike Conley, G, Timberwolves
103. Grayson Allen, G, Suns
104. Brandin Podziemski, G, Warriors
105. Donte DiVincenzo, G, Knicks
106. Chris Paul, G, Spurs
107. Alex Caruso, G, Thunder
108. Walker Kessler, C, Jazz
109. Jonas Valančiūnas, C, Wizards
110. Jakob Poeltl, C, Raptors
111. Jerami Grant, F, Trail Blazers
112. Dennis Schröder, G, Nets
113. John Collins, F, Jazz
114. Jalen Suggs, G, Magic
115. Deni Avdija, F, Trail Blazers
116. Josh Hart, G/F, Knicks
117. Buddy Hield, G, Warriors
118. Scoot Henderson, G, Trail Blazers
119. Amen Thompson, G/F, Rockets
120. Collin Sexton, G, Jazz
121. Naz Reid, F/C, Timberwolves
122. Klay Thompson, G/F, Mavericks
123. Ivica Zubac, C, Clippers
124. Zach Edey, F/C, Grizzlies
125. Clint Capela, C, Hawks
126. Jonathan Kuminga, F, Warriors
127. Dyson Daniels, G/F, Hawks
128. De’Anthony Melton, G, Warriors
129. Precious Achiuwa, F/C, Knicks
130. Aaron Gordon, F, Nuggets
131. Malik Monk, G/F, Kings
132. Marcus Smart, G, Grizzlies
133. Ausar Thompson, G/F, Pistons
134. Kent. Caldwell-Pope, G/F, Magic
135. Bojan Bogdanović, F, Nets
136. GG Jackson II, F, Grizzlies
137. Vasilije Micić, G, Hornets
138. Malik Beasley, G, Pistons
139. Kelly Olynyk, F/C, Raptors
140. Vince Williams Jr., G/F, Grizzlies
141. Jaime Jaquez Jr., F, Heat
142. Bobby Portis, F/C, Bucks
143. P.J. Washington, F, Mavericks
144. Derrick Jones Jr., F, Clippers

LATE-DRAFT VALUES

The majority of fantasy basketball cheat sheets and podcasts only seem to shine a light on the biggest names in the game. But you can't stop trying to acquire value even after the All-Stars have been gobbled up in your draft. Oftentimes, leagues are won or lost in the later stages of drafts — as well as during the season via savvy free-agent pickups and trade acquisitions.

With the NBA continuing to rise in popularity and fan knowledge of the player universe seemingly stronger than ever, larger leagues and deeper drafts have become commonplace. It's never been more imperative for managers to locate the diamonds in the rough in the later rounds.

Here are some of our favorite late-round value picks, all of whom typically got drafted in the 100-200 range in late-summer mocks



Dereck Lively II, F/C, Mavericks — Lively's breakout in last season's playoffs put him on the national map, but it hasn't translated to an elevated ADP in early drafts. He won't put up many monster scoring efforts, but his field-goal efficiency, blocks and rebounds make him well worth a pick anywhere in the 100-120 range.

De'Anthony Melton, G/F, Warriors — The Warriors have put together a remarkably good couple of offseasons. Melton deserves a mention with that, and he definitely deserves to be drafted in fantasy. He's an efficient scorer, a good floor-spacer and one of the most underrated defenders in the NBA. Players like him somehow always go to die in Philadelphia but thrive with Golden State. Melton can easily average 12/5/3 with close to two steals and some 3-pointers.

Dyson Daniels, G, Hawks — Another player who will be rewarded handsomely for finding a much-needed change of scenery, Daniels should get way more opportunities in the ATL than he ever had in NOLA (aka, the land of a million wings). DD stands 6-foot-7 with a 6-foot-10 wingspan, and

he's quietly one of the best perimeter defenders in the NBA. He also has developed his outside shot; he drained 38.5 percent of his 3-point attempts for Australia in the Paris Olympics this summer. He could be the Hawks' 2-guard of the future.

Dennis Schröder, G, Nets — On a bad Nets team with the ghost of Ben Simmons haunting the sideline, Schroder could thrive as the first or second scoring option. His FIBA and Olympics performances in 2023 and '24 have reminded the world that the German still has the speed, vision and scoring chops to remain a reliable fantasy asset.

P.J. Washington, F, Mavericks — He's very different from aforementioned Mavs big Lively, but he has plenty of fantasy appeal. Washington hit his stride after landing with Dallas at the trade

deadline last season, and he played a crucial part in the Mavericks' run to the NBA Finals. He offers scoring, 3-point shooting and some rebounding, and he could wind up being one of the steals of the draft if he develops further.

Malik Beasley, G/F, Pistons — Detroit desperately needed a 3-point shooter, and Beasley fits the bill. He might not thrive as a go-to scorer as well as past Motor City vets such as Bojan Bogdanović and Jerami Grant, but Beasley can easily provide top-150 value.

Jaime Jaquez Jr., G/F, Heat — It's only a matter of time before we witness the breakout of Jaquez, who seems like the next logical star to emerge out of South Beach. JJJ has a great basketball IQ, a knack for scoring and an eye for steals. His 3-point stroke leaves a lot to be desired, but he makes up for it by shooting well from the line. At worst, he's a strong upside stash in larger leagues.

Kelly Olynyk, F/C, Raptors — The seemingly ageless KO just keeps doing what he does, playing smart and unremarkable basketball and making few mistakes. The Raps desperately needed his playmaking and shooting when Scottie Barnes got hurt last season, and the veteran made the rest of Toronto's young players better just by being on the floor. Olynyk will rack up a ton of 10/5/5 games with decent percentages.

Other late-round value picks: Dalano Banton, G, Blazers; Jalen Smith, F/C, Bulls; Caleb Martin, G/F, 76ers; Alec Burks, G, Heat; Santi Aldama, F/C, Grizzlies; Yves Missi, C, Pelicans; Noah Clowney, F, Nets; Donovan Clingan, C, Blazers



FANTASY SLEEPERS, BREAKOUTS AND BUSTS

SLEEPERS

PAOLO BANCHERO F, MAGIC

Banchero followed up his Rookie of the Year campaign by making the All-Star Game in Year 2, becoming just the 10th player in the past 25 years to check both of those boxes. Many fantasy managers worry about Paolo's free-throw shooting (72.5 percent last year), but a deeper dive reveals that he's steadily improving (77.9 percent in Orlando's 25 games following the All-Star break). He also played 80 games last season, averaging 22.6 points, 6.9 rebounds, and 5.4 assists. If Banchero can keep improving his shot and develop into a better defender, the sky's the limit.

JALEN DUREN F/C, PISTONS

Duren ranked among the top 80 in nine-category leagues last season, and he could easily elevate into the top 50 within a quickly improving Pistons offense. New Detroit head coach J.B. Bickerstaff should be able to help Duren further tap into his upside as a shot-blocker and interior scorer. He's already better at scoring and rebounding than fantasy favorites like Onyeka Okongwu, with similar shooting percentages. Don't sleep on Duren.

RJ BARRETT G/F, RAPTORS

Something clicked after the Knicks traded him to his hometown team. Barrett, who had averaged 18.2 points per game on 42.3 percent shooting and 33.1 percent from 3-point land in 26 games with New York last season, shot up to 21.8 ppg on 55.3 percent from the field and 39.2 percent from 3-point range in Toronto. Add 6.4 boards and 4.1 assists per game as a Raptor — both marks blew away the 24-year-old's career highs through his first four seasons — and there's plenty of reason to think Barrett's best is yet to come now that he's happy at home.

TYUS JONES G, SUNS

The Suns signed their first legit starting point guard since Chris Paul. Jones averaged 12.0 points and 7.3 assists last season in a hapless Wizards offense, and now he gets to run point for Kevin Durant, Devin Booker, Bradley Beal and reigning 3-point percentage champ Grayson Allen (Jones' teammate at Duke and with the Memphis Grizzlies). Jones has led the NBA in assist-to-turnover ratio for five straight years, and last year, he broke his own record with a 7.3-to-1 mark while posting tremendous shooting splits (48.9/41.4/80.0). Jones won't contribute in a ton of other areas, but he makes for a hell of a pick for any fantasy team built on efficiency.

BUDDY HIELD G, WARRIORS

Buddy didn't work out in Philadelphia — or Indiana before that — but both teams proved to be poor fits. He still made 38.9 percent of his 3-point attempts with the Sixers last season, but he finished with a career-low 19.2 percent usage rate. Hield will be utilized more often and more effectively in Steve Kerr's system alongside Steph Curry, and he might run away with the Sixth Man of the Year award.

Other sleepers: Zach Edey, C, Grizzlies; Jonas Valančiūnas, C, Wizards; Bojan Bogdanović, F, Nets; Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, G/F, Magic; Derrick Jones Jr., F, Clippers



PAOLO BANCHERO

BREAKOUTS

EVAN MOBLEY F, CAVALIERS

Mobley earned All-Rookie honors in 2022 and an All-Defensive selection in 2023, but his ascent to stardom suffered a temporary setback when knee and ankle injuries cost him 32 games last season. Once he returned to health, he was as dominant as just about any big in the NBA playoffs. He swatted 21 shots over a seven-game series against Orlando, then averaged 21.4 points, 9.4 boards, and 3.2 assists while shooting 62.7 percent against the Boston Celtics.

CADE CUNNINGHAM G, PISTONS

The MotorCade breakout is coming! Cunningham took some major steps forward in 2023-24 (when he played), finishing with career-highs in scoring (22.7 ppg), assists (7.5) and shooting efficiency from all three levels (44.9/35.5/86.9). Detroit has a pretty

good team around him now, and new head coach J.B. Bickerstaff should be able to get the best out of the 23-year-old. Don't reach too early in dynasty and keeper formats, though — injuries have kept Cunningham from playing more than 64 games in each of his first three NBA seasons.

TREY MURPHY III F, PELICANS

Murphy evokes fear in the hearts of injury-weary fantasy managers, but nobody can argue with his upside when he's healthy. In 57 games last season, he shot 38 percent from long range and maintained a per-game average of three made treys (fitting nickname, huh?). He's also a career 86.7 percent free-throw shooter, and his seven-foot wingspan helps him defend and rebound better than most small forwards with 6-foot-8, 210-pound frames. If Murphy can play a full season like he did two years ago, he could develop even further in his age-24 season.

BRANDIN PODZIEMSKI G, WARRIORS

Golden State could be in for some "addition by subtraction" after the departure of longtime Dub Klay Thompson. Podz won't ever be a Splash Brother, obviously, but he does a lot of things Klay can no longer do at this stage of his career. Look at his per-36 numbers: 12.5 points, 7.8 rebounds, 5.0 assists, 1.1 steals and 1.6 made 3-pointers. His free-throw shooting (63.3 percent) needs work, but his efficiency from the floor (45.4 percent) and from distance (38.5 percent) suggests he's a worthy successor to Killa Klay.



BRANDIN PODZIEMSKI

CHRISTIAN BRAUN G, NUGGETS

Denver said goodbye to Kentavious Caldwell-Pope this offseason, so Braun has an opportunity to emerge within one of the smarter and more calculated offenses in the NBA. His per-36 numbers last year (13/7/3/1/1) combined with his strong shooting and low turnovers tell the story of a 23-year-old more than ready to assume KCP's role

Other top breakout candidates: Dereck Lively II, F/C, Mavericks; Andrew Nembhard, G, Pacers; Keyonte George, G, Jazz; GG Jackson II, G/F, Grizzlies; Dyson Daniels, G/F, Hawks

BUSTS

ANTHONY EDWARDS, G/F, TIMBERWOLVES

Look, Ant-man is one of the biggest names and most electric players in the NBA. He's one of the emergent young faces of the league, and he keeps evolving as a lethal pure-scoring machine. But swagger and highlight-reel dunks don't win 9-cat matchups — stats do — and Edwards simply cannot produce fantasy value akin to the other players around his early ADP. He doesn't do enough defensively, on the glass or outside the 3-point arc to warrant a pick in or around the first round.

JALEN GREEN, G, ROCKETS

Green finished the 2023-24 season red hot, leading many to believe he's a top breakout candidate this coming season. Don't fall for the hype, especially at his

continually rising ADP. The man has repeatedly proven that he's an extremely streaky shooter, he always puts defense on the backburner and he's nowhere near the playmaker head coach Ime Udoka and the Rockets need him to be (3.5 assists/2.3 turnovers per game last season). Don't be surprised if Green cedes time to Amen Thompson, Reed Sheppard and Cam Whitmore while his investors continue waiting for him to fully break out.



JALEN GREEN

JULIUS RANDLE, F, KNICKS

The Villanova WildKicks have re-energized the fans in the basketball capital of the world. However, Randle — who missed 36 games and the Knicks' entire playoff run in 2024 — remains the one veteran who has yet to benefit from the movement.

JONATHAN KUMINGA, F, WARRIORS

Freak athleticism makes for fun entertainment value, but it doesn't necessarily translate to fantasy value. Kuminga needs to develop his 3-point shot, defense and rebounding before he even comes close to yielding value around where he's being drafted.

Other notable bust candidates: Scoot Henderson, G, Blazers; Alex Sarr, F, Wizards; Klay Thompson, G/F, Mavericks; Mark Williams, F/C, Hornets; Tobias Harris, F, Pistons; Marcus Smart, G, Grizzlies



EXPERTS SAY ... 2024-25 FANTASY ANALYST SURVEY

We surveyed 19 of the brightest and most popular fantasy basketball analysts in the industry, picking their brains with multiple-choice and open-ended questions about their top draft targets, core objectives and strategies, favorite writers and podcasts and more.

Here's our panel of contributors, a group that shall henceforth be referred to as "the League of Extraordinary Fantasy Analysts":

SLOAN PIVA, The Sporting News/
Athlon Sports (@SloanPiva)

KYLE IRVING, The Sporting News
(@KyleIrv_)

JOSH LLOYD, Basketball Monster/
Locked On Fantasy Basketball
(@RedRocks_bball)

DAN TITUS, Yahoo (@DanTitus)

STAN SON, The Athletic
(@Stan_Son)

NOAH RUBIN, Rotoworld/FBI/
Tank Me Later (@NoahRubin22)

DAN BESBRIS, Old Man Squad
(@DanBesbris)

ALEX RIKLEEN, RotoWire
(@Rikleen)

KEN CRITES, RotoWire
(@KenCrites)

MATT SMITH, Basketball Monster
(@SmanSports)

RAPHIELLE JOHNSON, Rotoworld
(@RaphielleJ)

ADAM STOCK, Elite Fantasy
Basketball (@AdamGStock)

KAYLA FONTE, The Last Word on
Sports/Between Two Hoops
(@Kayla_Fonte)

KARAN TALWAR, SwishScribe
(@Karan_Talwar27)

ROI CIRUELA, Fantasy Basketball
PH (@NBAFantasyPapi)

ERIK ONG, Fantasy Fast Break
Podcast (@Rotomancer)

STEVE ST-PIERRE, Menace
Podmen (@Podcast_Pierre)

SCOTT KELLER, Menace Podmen
(@DetSkeller)

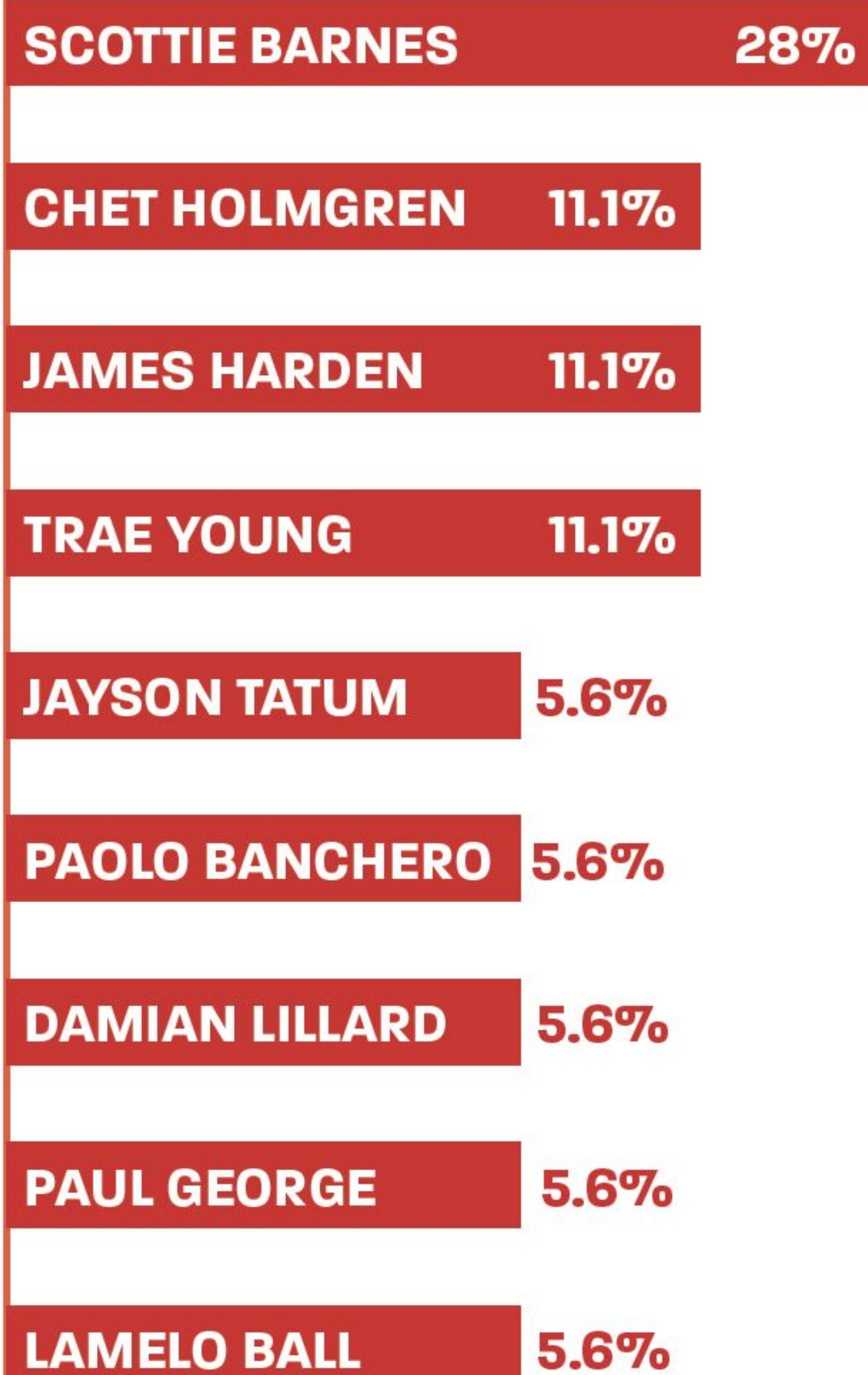
WILLIAM HARRIS, The All Rookie
Podcast (@WilliamIsBill)



"I still have one more year of taking **Nikola Jokić** before Wemby. The Joker is only 29 and still a good bet to play more games than **Wembanyama**. San Antonio will still struggle next year. The chance of the Spurs tanking paired with Wemby's slight frame tell me that Joker is the smarter move."

— Ken Crites

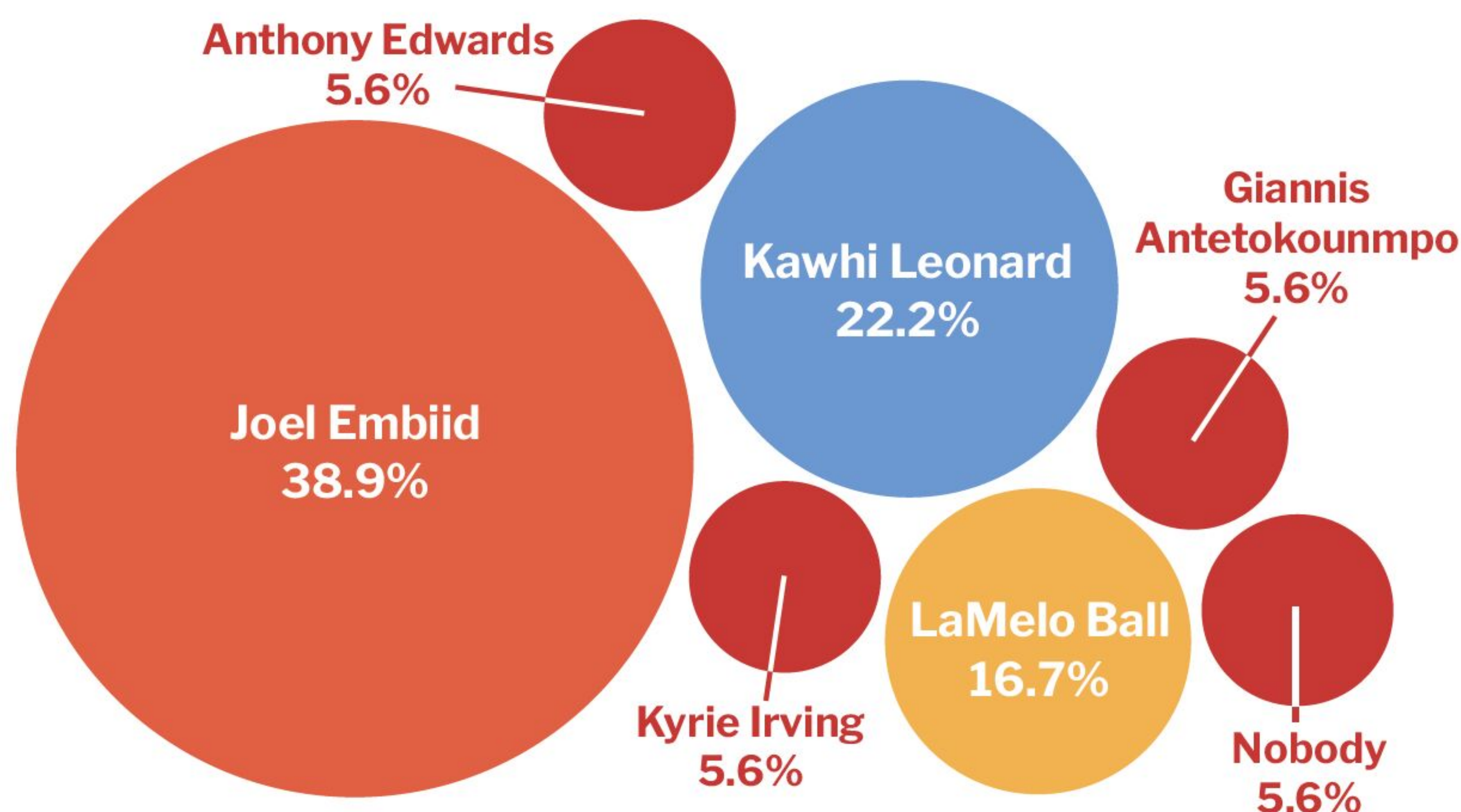
WHICH PLAYER DO YOU LOVE IN OR AROUND THE SECOND ROUND OF THIS YEAR'S DRAFTS?



"Give me the '**WEMBY VARIANT**' that plays 82 games: **CHET HOLMGREN.**"

— Roi Ciruela

BIGGEST EARLY-DRAFT BUST: WHICH HIGH-ADP GUY ARE YOU AVOIDING IN ALL DRAFTS?



WHO'S YOUR "MY GUY"
— THE PLAYER YOU SEEM
TO BE TARGETING IN THE
MOST DRAFTS?

- 2
- 1
- JAMES HARDEN
DESMOND BANE
NOBODY
- DOMANTAS SABONIS
FRANZ WAGNER
BAM ADEBAYO
BRANDIN PODZIEMSKI
BRANDON MILLER
JALEN WILLIAMS
JALEN DUREN
JA MORANT
MYLES TURNER
DYSON DANIELS
DARIUS GARLAND
TOBIAS HARRIS

“**Jalen Duren**. He’s only 20 years old, he’s a walking double-double, and he’s too physical and athletic for the defensive stats to not come around eventually.”
— Kyle Irving

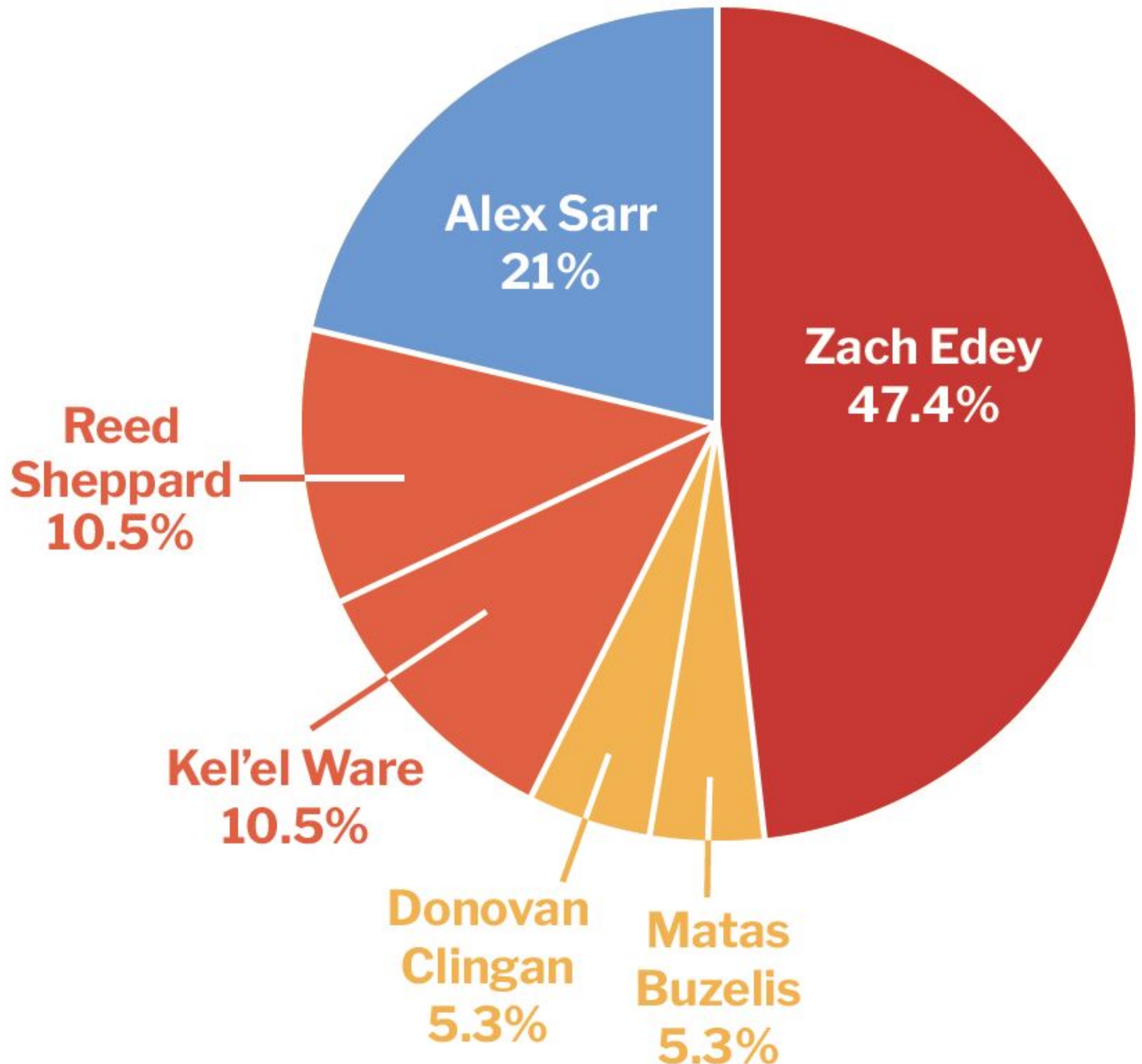
BREAKOUT: WHICH
PLAYER WILL MAKE THE
BIGGEST YEAR-TO-YEAR
FANTASY LEAP?

- 2
- 1
- DYSON DANIELS
RJ BARRETT
SCOOT HENDERSON
JAIME JAQUEZ JR.
- VICTOR WEMBANYAMA
PAOLO BANCHERO
CADE CUNNINGHAM
JALEN WILLIAMS
JALEN SUGGS
JALEN DUREN
BRANDON MILLER
IMMANUEL QUICKLEY
CAM THOMAS
JOSH GIDDEY

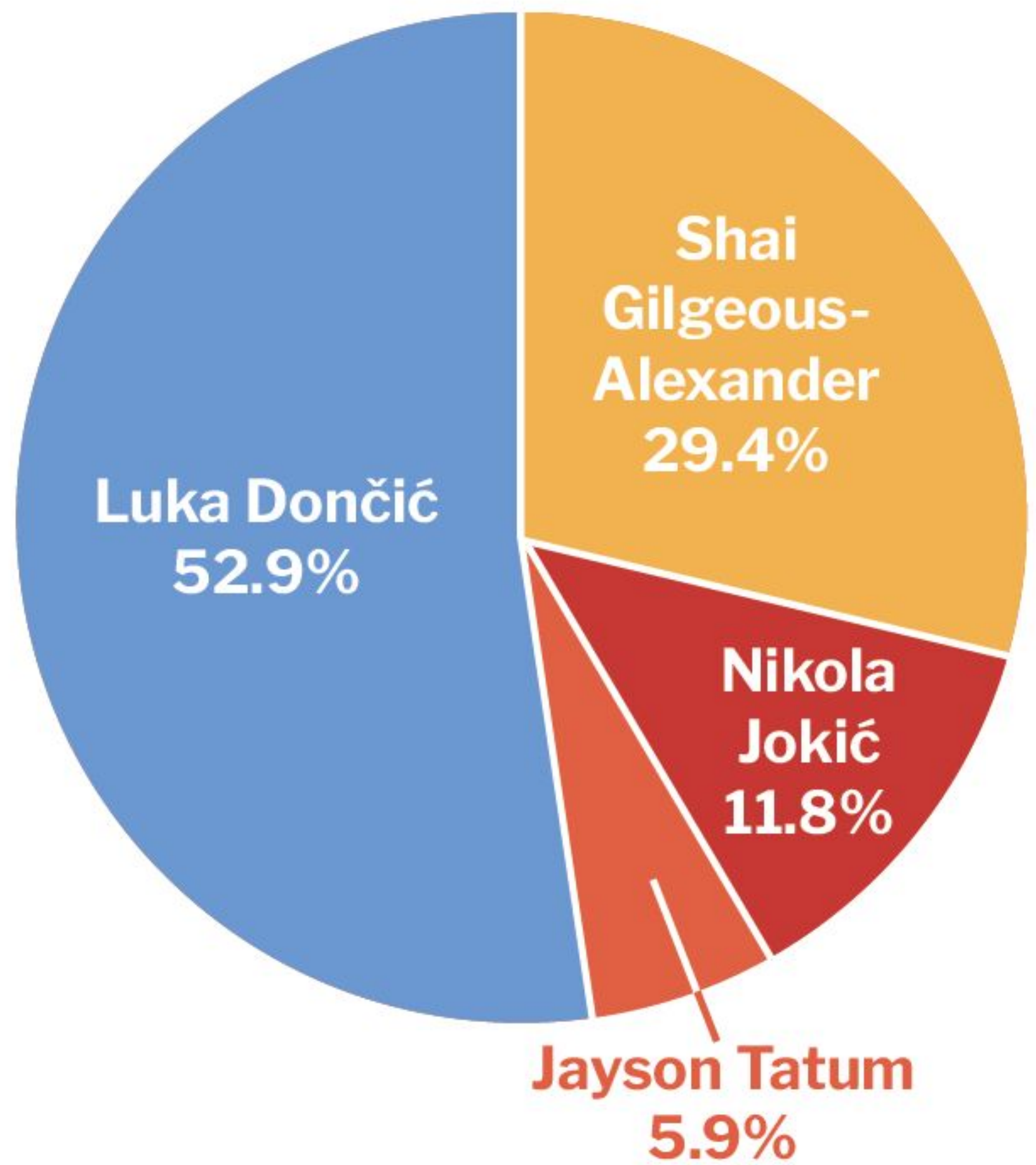
“**Jalen Williams** was ranked just inside the top 50 last season. He could easily be a top 20-25 player this season as he takes his passing to another level without Josh Giddey.”
— Matt Smith

WHO WILL BE THE
MOST IMPACTFUL
ROOKIE IN FANTASY
THIS SEASON?

“**Zach Edey**. It seems to be trending in the direction that he will start for Memphis, and if he gets to 25 minutes, that is a standard league draftable player, top 130-ish, even with limited usage/role on this sneaky-loaded Memphis team.”
— Karan Talwar



WHO WILL BE NAMED
NBA MVP FOR
2024- 2025?



“Narratives play a big part in MVP voting, and Luka Dončić reaching the Finals helped his case for this year.”
— Karan Talwar

WHICH HIGH-RISK
PLAYER DO YOU THINK
WILL YIELD THE HIGHEST
REWARD TO INVESTORS?

LAMELO BALL	25%
KAWHI LEONARD	25%
JOEL EMBIID	18.8%
JA MORANT	12.5%
ANTHONY DAVIS	12.5%
JORDAN POOLE	6.3%

“**Kawhi Leonard**. He’s a walking injury risk but is also a crazy-good two-way monster who shoots impeccably well from the field and the line. He should fall far enough in drafts to beat his ADP.”
— Erik Ong

EXCLUDING YOUR OWN, WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE FAN-
TASY HOOPS PODCAST, WRITER, OR WEBSITE?

PODCAST	
Locked On Fantasy Basketball	30%
Old Man Squad	16.7%
Balls Deep/FBI	13.3%
Establish the Run	6.7%
NBA Big Boards	6.7%
Rotoworld	6.7%
RotoWire	6.7%
Tank Me Later	6.7%
Lowe Post	6.7%

WRITER/ANALYST/SITE:	
Josh Lloyd, Basketball Monster	30%
Dan Titus, Yahoo	15%
Adam King, FBI	15%
Mike Passador, Sports Ethos	10%
Eric Wong, The Athletic	5%
Sloan Piva, The Sporting News	5%
Kyle Irving, The Sporting News	5%
Rhett Bauer, Roundball Rhetoric	5%
Establish the Run	5%
RotoWire	5%

THE PUNT-CAT APPROACH: A NECESSARY FANTASY STRATEGY IN 2024

BY SLOAN PIVA

Punting categories in fantasy basketball has gone from being a niche strategy to an almost necessary part of the roster-building process. If you want to succeed in a league full of knowledgeable hoopheads, you not only need to embrace the punt-cat approach — you also need to do it better than the rest of your leaguemates trying to carry out the same objective.

Whenever the subject of punting categories comes up in the company of casual or first-time fantasy basketball managers, questions almost immediately arise. This column will serve to proactively address those questions, helping those largely unfamiliar with punting to understand the practice and maybe even teaching the experts a couple of handy tips going into draft season.

Let's get right to our punt-cat TED Talk and hopefully help shape you into a more confident and polished drafter on your league's big day.

Why punt categories in fantasy basketball?

It's a great question. Many will argue that competitive teams in the NBA strive to assemble a balanced attack and check all the boxes when building rosters, a strategy fantasy managers should mirror. However, winning on the actual hardwood and winning in fantasy are inherently different, and trying too hard to be good in all nine fantasy categories could potentially prevent us from being "great" in a handful of cats.

In fantasy, a 6-3 or even 5-4 win gets it done every time. In fact, successful punt-cat strategists win by these margins quite often, while the "balanced roster" crowd and the "best available" drafters often see much more volatility on a week-to-week basis. Don't rely on coin flips by choosing the futile strategy of

checking all the boxes — rarely do experts of the fantasy industry even win 8-1 or 7-2 every week of the season. It's the squads that embrace their strengths and accept their weaknesses that achieve consistent season-long greatness.

How do you prepare for a punt-cat draft approach?

Fantasy success always hinges on preparation, so just reading the fantasy section of this magazine gives you an early leg up on your competition. Study rankings — lots of them. Participate in a ton of mock drafts — they're free, and running early and often. Invite your leaguemates to said mocks so you can study your competition and take notes when you see certain trends taking hold.

Whom do you naturally gravitate to during the early stages of drafts? You can stick to those instincts, but devise a plan so you can supplement those foundational roster pieces with complementary assets. If you always go to Giannis Antetokounmpo in the first round, consider then targeting Domantas Sabonis and De'Aaron Fox — two fellow stat-stuffing studs who struggle at the free-throw line like Giannis. If you land Tyrese Haliburton early, go for other players who rack up assists, knock down 3-pointers and shoot well from the line and ignore blocks and turnovers (most experts ignore turnovers, anyway, to be honest).

Compose lists for each potential punt-cat build so you have rankings for every possible scenario. You might not go into a draft thinking you'll draft Joel Embiid, but if he falls somewhere in the range of picks 8-12, you probably can't pass on the former MVP.

And since he's a core guy who does everything but rack up assists and steals, your lists would have you

well-prepared to embrace a strategy to punt those two categories.

What common mistakes and misconceptions should first-time punters avoid?

Don't lean *too* far into a punt. When a great player falls a round and a half further than he should, don't pass on him just because he shoots pretty well from the line and you're punting free-throw percentage. Punting doesn't mean you're tanking a cat — it just means you're not prioritizing that cat because strengthening the others is more important.

You also shouldn't reach too far for certain players just because they fit your build. Bagging DeMar DeRozan because he fits your punt-3s strategy is good, but not if you draft DeRozan two rounds ahead of his ADP. Now you lost value because you made the punt the only focal point or guideline of your draft, when it should be merely a facet of your overall approach.

And give your team some balance. We knocked that word before, simply because some managers try way too hard to be good at every stat. But in reality, you don't want to be completely awful at anything. If one of your punt strategies falls through, you will need the help in other areas to survive. And if you're facing a manager whose team punted the same cats as you, you'll definitely need some help in the ancillary categories.

Resources like Basketball Monster and Hashtag Basketball allow you to view and sort rankings with certain categories punted. Use them! Nobody nails a punt-cat strategy on the first try, but practicing and setting yourself up with the right tools will be instrumental to your early success. Getting good at punting is like unlocking a cheat code, and it will go from being an occasional method of roster-building to the only way you draft.



**EARN.
INVEST.
LIVE.**

TheStreet®

TAKE YOUR SHOT



DOMINATE
NOT YOUR
THE COURT,
DEVICE



THESE STATEMENTS HAVE NOT BEEN EVALUATED BY THE FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION. THIS PRODUCT IS NOT INTENDED TO DIAGNOSE, TREAT, CURE OR PREVENT ANY DISEASE.

Does not improve physical performance, dexterity, or endurance. Do not take more than two per day, spaced hours apart. Extra Strength 5-hour ENERGY® shots contain caffeine comparable to 12 ounces of the leading premium coffee. Limit caffeine products to avoid nervousness, sleeplessness, and occasional rapid heartbeat. See 5hourenergy.com for more details. ©2024 Living Essentials Marketing, LLC. All rights reserved.